The Road Not Taken

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The Road Not Taken

by TonightAppearance

Summary

When Rachel Amber is trying to figure her life anew after fighting with her drug addiction and rejection from her family, she discovers another secret, this time changing her life forever. Dealing with the consequences of cheating, depression and a drastic past, she and Chloe put their life back on track and work on their relationship, paying back for their own mistakes and saving whatever was left from the bits and pieces. Tangled between the net of social and personal dependences the couple fights for their future, ditching the past, but it’s not easy to leave everything behind nor build something from the ashes. The price of a game changer is high, and trailblazing an entirely new path is more laborious than following their supposed fate blindly.

The story takes place directly after the short story "The Talk That Never Happened" and is the direct continuation of it. It includes explicit, although not vulgar, sex scenes, graphic violence, and vocabulary, as presented in the games and tackles the topic of verbal, emotional and sexual abuse. It also follows canon to a certain extent, consequently referring to both "Life is Strange" and "Before the Storm."
Here she was again, outside of the lighthouse. The day was late and tired, still breathing heavily from an excess heat. The sun was about to come down now, reaching the old tall building with its last orange strength. Summer afternoons could last forever, especially when you are a small kid playing around and exploring or an adult, waiting for or avoiding someone.

Rachel sat on the stairs to the lighthouse, first stretching her arms, then bending her knees to make herself more comfortable. Taking off her jacket she didn’t forget to go through all the pockets just in case she would get lucky and magically find a surprise candy. Tooth fairies don’t bring drugs though, so she just gasped with disappointment, frustration and relief at the same time. It would complicate everything.

Her clothes were searched. She was searched. No room for magic, especially the worst kind.

Having only a plain and simple menthol smoke, she lit it up, patiently waiting. She wasn’t in a mood for forbearance no more than anticipating the moment of peace. Her hands were shaking a little bit, unstable and unpredictable shivers went through the girl’s body up and down, back and forth. Her knuckles went pale, while clenching fists and fighting another wave of this sick need. Rachel put all her strength into this battle, hoping it would be the last one, but knew better. It won’t. She was used to mix hope with a lie for so long, so the sore acceptance didn’t come easily.

Damn, she just came here to relax.

Frankly she had gone through her worst of times already, leaving most of the shadows behind. She had drowned in the darkness, screamed in the light, begged and yelled for this one thing that would make her feel normal, feel alive, feel in general - one enchanted fix. It was like traveling between worlds, crawling on the bottom, scratching and humiliating herself inside and out in front of people she had previously wanted to impress so badly. Scream, curse, vomit, repeat. She had been given water, something to eat and a blanket, and then the diagram had repeated itself again and again, over and over for more than a week. It seemed more like years, but she couldn’t complain. She finally felt better, although it was a bittersweet victory.

Right now it was just an itch below her skin, a demand not needed to be fulfilled. Right now it felt pretty good.

The future looked ugly though.

It had been more than a month but the memories of humiliation and uneven fighting were still radiant in her memory. She despised all the recalls, hating every minute and every sound she had made, but it was history—a hurting story of a girl who was trying to get better.

Her own power of remembering every single detail of her homemade rehab was flabbergasted to say the least. David stopping her firmly when she tried to break out and run away, Joyce patiently waiting till she finished eating, Chloe holding her day and night, forgetting about her own sleep and rest. Sometimes you really try to remember somebody’s face, smile or gesture and can’t get it out of your mind cache. Sometimes you really do want to forget, especially all those worst days or months of your life and it seems unachievable.

She had too much stuff on her list to forget about anyway.

She looked at her phone, mostly checking the hour, but also curious if any message had appeared in
the meantime. A few months ago, she would be flooded with icons, texts and pictures. The only thing that looked at her from the screen now was the set of sad, dumb numbers—hour, minute, second. She looked at the time, feeling numb and senseless, to the point that she stopped paying attention to the outside world.

She didn’t hear the truck parking by the lighthouse, or the fast steps on the sand.

“There you are.” Rising her head, Rachel choked on her own smile, seeing the storm of blue hair. The girl wanted to get up, but Chloe stopped her with one small gesture and took a space by her side instead.

They didn’t have to talk much looking at the tacky sunset, and Rachel couldn’t complain feeling her girl’s arm around her shoulders. It felt nice and ordinary. She never wanted anything ordinary, but this time had passed and faded away like a photo left on a sunny windowsill. Ordinary felt good at the moment. She missed it.

“Hey.” Chloe smiled lightly and kissed her lips. It was a short way of saying welcome, nothing unusual, but still magical. “You had to walk for hours to get here, girl. Are you feeling ok?”

Rachel snuggled into her girlfriend’s arms, asking for protection and warmth.

“You are still shaking.” Chloe noticed with a protective tone. She changed a lot recently. The past few months were indeed very hard for both of them.

“It’s the cold.” They both knew Rachel was lying, but was it really a lie, even that obvious? She promised herself not to stretch the truth though. She didn’t know why but her first thought was always to brush off the facts and come up with something meaningless and easy. Old habits die hard.

“I still can feel it. It’s still inside and screaming.” Rachel confessed, feeling weak and small again. It was hard to rebuild her typical confidence even if previously it had been just an act. She didn’t like feeling vulnerable, hating not being able to stand up for herself and rely on others. Trusting somebody, anybody, with this spiral of emotions was destructive enough. Trusting somebody she had hurt deeply was even worse.

“I know. It will pass. We will kick this fucking thing out.”

Rachel suspected that Chloe was talking from her own personal experience. Her girl knew more about getting rid of an addiction than she should, although she never slipped a single hint leading to any kind of reveal. The fact that Rachel didn’t know about another slip up Chloe had had to go through and couldn’t be there to help, was another sin she put on her unholy list. Another secret to uncover, another coded message she had missed along the way. One day she would ask. Not today though.

“You are doing great.” Chloe moved her closer, closing her in her arms, kissing her forehead. “Even David said you rule, Amber.”

“The step-douche is proud of me? Who would’ve guessed?” Rachel shook her head, smiling sadly. They dropped the nicknames for David a while ago, but it was still playable as an inside joke.

“Everybody is.” Rachel heard the response and sighed deeply. Not everybody, for sure. This was still an untouchable subject, yet again, the topic she had ran away from as soon as the conversation had started. She preferred to take the risk of shaking, and howling at the moon for a fix without any other protection than to face this particular drawback.

“And that brings me to…” Chloe, sensing Rachel’s mood, started the sentence slowly, knowing they
had to go through it. Her personal bias against the topic was not important though.

“They called again, huh?” Rachel didn’t even have strength to fight back and put the conversation through a different route. She was too tired to run away again or go any further. Knowing she would have to face the consequences and go through another hell of questioning and arguments was a distress, but she didn’t have a choice. She had felt choice-less for a while lately.

“Yeah, they did.” Chloe sighed again. “They probably… want you back.”

“They won’t get me back.”

“Rach…” Chloe kissed her temple. “Let’s just talk to them. You haven’t been in touch with your parents for months. I’m not a huge fan of them, but fuck, you have hella stuff to discuss.”

It was strange to sit here, just like two people in love, like an ordinary couple, enjoying the bay’s sweet scent. Rachel’s breath touched Chloe’s cheek with an ardent recurrence. Yet she didn’t seem angry.

Sha came here to relax after all.

“My parents gave up on me a long time ago.” Her voice was trembling and tranquil. “They saw me slipping, they saw me drugged and addicted, involved with the wrong people and being in the wrong places and I wasn’t the perfect daughter anymore. They don’t discuss disappointments, and I was and still am the bigger one.”

Chloe said nothing. Arguing about the facts was the phase they had passed a long time ago. Both girls knew the uncomfortable and unfair reality too well and started to learn how to accept it. Dealing with it was bringing another big pile of issues though; a can of never-ending worms.

“And now they want me back, to talk to me even, only because you fixed me up. You and your mom and David. I’m back and running, well maybe not exactly, but fuck… They will try to force their unrealistic plans on me. I can fucking feel it.”

Forcing Rachel to do anything seemed impossible a few months ago. Right now, she was so weakened, fragile and infirm that Chloe couldn’t stop wondering if her girlfriend might be alright. If the pressure would be applied in the right dose and in the right place, Rachel might give up. There was no place for compromise with her parents, as they learned a long time ago. Overwhelmed by her own wrongdoings, Rachel was still very lost and off track. She slowly was showing signs of getting back on her feet, mentally of course, but still not everything was sorted out yet. Maybe they really should wait with this phone call.

On the other hand, Mr. Amber was pushy and didn’t leave them much choice. It was better to deal with him on the phone, with a conversation you could always stop with one click, than in person. He vowed to show up in Arcadia Bay if they wouldn’t call him back. Chloe didn’t want to scare Rachel with this possibility, but had to take it under consideration.

“They can’t force you to do anything. You are with me now, so…” She tried politely. It sounded like a desperate manipulation and felt almost like switching roles with the Rachel Amber she had known before.

“Chloe... you don’t fucking understand…” Rachel bit her lip, strengthening and freeing herself from the embrace. “They don’t know about... us.”

She got up and walked a few steps toward the rusted truck. She was shy, cute and nervous. Her movements were a little stiff and awkward. Chloe couldn’t stop herself from a short laugh.
“Are they blind?” Choking on her own smile, she adjusted the crooked beanie on her head. Holding Rachel was always messy, one way or another. “C’mon Rach... No one is that visually impaired.”

“Some people like to stay blind if it’s comfortable enough.” Rachel hissed angrily. She didn’t want to load this on Chloe, but was slowly losing her patience. “I was taught well.”

Here the supposedly perfect house card was played again. It was always in the play, but Chloe was more than annoyed by this serve.

“All right, Amber, stop blaming yourself again. You really think that’s the problem?”

Rachel was strangely more nervous and anxious than she should. It didn’t feel like her. Was she really worrying about her parents’ reaction to a relationship in general, or a relationship with Chloe in particular? The good old fear of Rachel Amber not being keen of reveling her involvement with a social delinquent returned in full force. Her self-esteem was never something Chloe would take advantage of, so she became unsure and awkward immediately.

“Partly, yes. They think you took care of me, along with your parents, as a friendly effort.” Rachel confirmed, opening her arms in a helpless gesture. The shivers and spasms inside her stomach intensified a little. She wasn’t sure if it was from the cleanup or the tension and anxiety.

“It was hella friendly!”

“Yeah, well you have to revisit your friendship definition, Price. I don’t think what you did to me in the bathroom stall a couple of weeks ago was something you do to all your gal pals.” She wrapped her arms around herself, a simple self-protection gesture.

Chloe really tried not to blush. She wasn’t embarrassed by any means, but the memories were still strong enough to boil her blood again.

“And if you do, we really have to talk seriously.” Rachel mumbled and winked playfully. The habit of flirting as a mental shielding was always the best protection from her own thoughts.

“I don’t and you know it.” Chloe grinned, and then grew thoughtful again “Rach… I’m as tired of these serious talks as much as you are, really. It seems that we don’t do anything else lately.”

“So, you’re not surprised that I preferred to delight myself with the view of a beautiful sunset than to jump to another one of those issues? Don’t we have enough on our plate right now?”

“I can’t blame you, and frankly I don’t give a damn about your parents.” Chloe also got up and rose her hands in a calming gesture.

“Damn, Price, you’re starting to quote the classics.” Rachel crossed her arms around her chest and looked at Chloe mischievously. The change of subjects was unintentional, but very needed. It would work perfectly a few months ago, but now Rachel had literally zero chance to win this game with the new edition of Chloe Price.

“I’m under a bad influence” Chloe gave a crooked smile, but she apparently didn’t want to give up. “But we have to sort it out. Together, ok? I will be by your side as we will fucking call them. Just that.” She was determined to solve one problem after another, one by one, and not to lose her focus. It was damn easy to get distracted with Rachel Amber, that’s why she didn’t even try to look into those hazel eyes.

“Fuck.” Rachel turned back, leaning on the cold, rough metal of truck’s bed, as she needed some support while getting her thoughts together. She was shaking again, although the reason was
completely different. Chloe had to admit, she was surprised. Why was Rachel randomly afraid to talk to her father? She had never been afraid before. Why was this thing escalating and becoming the main dark cloud randomly? On the other hand – a lot of things had changed.

“What’s the problem Rachel? Talk to me.” Chloe walked to her, putting her hands on her shoulders.

“The problem with my parents, my father especially is... I don’t know how to force them to take me seriously. I gave them a hella ride, through drugs, arguments, arson and even Frank. I ran away from home more than once. I gave them way more than one reason not to trust my words, and me... in general. And now... I just don’t want to fuck up again, telling them about you and how important it is for me. They won’t believe me, thinking it’s another stupid thing in my life and ‘dear daughter, you will wait and learn, it’s yet another dumb fucked phase,’ as they’ve always been saying. I don’t want to introduce them to my life, my real life, like this and I don’t fucking know how to do it properly.”

She was almost screaming at the end. Anger came easily to her, as natural as breathing.

“Rachel, I think you’re fucking exaggerating. It’s not a coming out talk. Really. They just want to know how you feel and shit.”

“But it might be. It will be anyway. You really think they will be fine with, oh I’m all right daddy, now fucking blow me? No, they will start digging, and question me over and over. I know how they roll, experienced it pretty often, and I don’t have strength right now to give them another theatrical performance. I know exactly what they will say, what they will ask about. You, me, and about everything else. They will come to the question of why I’m living under the same roof with your parents and with YOU and will ask when will I stop living there. I fucked up, you guys put me back together, equipped and patched up, thank you very much, Rachel can go. They’re gonna ask about the next step, Chloe, because that’s who they are. And my next step is your next step for fuck’s sake.”

“I love when you say it.” Chloe murmured, looking into her eyes.

“Yeah well, fucking adorable. Do you understand why I don’t want to take this call?”

“Partly. They don’t wanna trust you, fine. They don’t have to. What do you want, Rachel? You want to force them to love your choices? I’m probably the worst choice...”

“Don’t even start.” It was clearly a warning, but Chloe ignored it anyway.

“In your father’s eyes, yes, it’s true. A fucking high school dropout, a rebel and a broken girl from a broken home, as he said to me more than once. I’m the worst of your choices. Fine, what’s the big fucking deal. So, what? I took care of you when he forgot your phone number and bailed on you for months. If it’s not enough for him, nothing will. If I’m not enough for his precious daughter, great. And if I’m not, that’s not your problem.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Chloe! That’s not what this is about!” Rachel rolled her eyes. She loved the tone of her girlfriend’s voice, always protective and a little bit cocky, but this time Chloe was miles away from the real issue - the issue that Rachel would prefer not to elaborate about.

“Then what? That you’re gay?” Chloe opened her arms completely dumbfounded.

“I’m not gay.” Rachel sniffed, tucking her hair behind her left ear.

“Oh yeah? You were pretty gay in that bathroom stall.”

“Shut up, Chloe.” It was Rachel’s turn to blush. She wasn’t even sure why she kept denying and abnegating. She hated any kind of labels and formal description though. It didn’t matter if it was
about sexual orientation or class assignments. “It’s not about being gay.” She whispered finally.

“Women! Why the hell do I have to love women!” Chloe raised her hands. “Can you just please tell me what’s the big deal? You are dancing around the problem like it was a fucking pole. And no!” She looked at her girlfriend threateningly. “No sexy jokes, please!”

“It’s about…” Rachel was digging a small hole in the ground with the top of her shoe. Being anxious made her even more beautiful. This whole honesty and no secrecy thing was pretty new and she still wasn’t great at explaining her deepest fears. Who was anyway?

“They will ask me about my plans for the future, ok?” She spilled out finally. The words came uneasily, more like a murmur than spoken sentences. “Not only for the next week or month, but in general. They will ask what are we planning to do, where to go and fucking shit like that, and I seriously don’t know. We didn’t graduate, we’re both hella jobless and I don’t wanna be a fucking model anymore… I was just living day by day with you and it’s seriously enough. I… was afraid of making any plans or dreams, since the second chance you gave me. Just in case…” She was stumbling on her words for a while, and finally fell silent.

Planning life with Rachel Amber wasn’t an uncommon thought for Chloe, but it had never had any solid form or strategy. They dreamed about running away to California or becoming rich and famous, but this was something entirely different. She was right. They couldn’t feed Rachel’s parents with this bullshit, cute or not, but disrespectful in the first place. If they would try, the whole conversation would become a huge fight with an even worse outcome. Lying and cheating wasn’t a way out, especially with the Ambers, who were way better with this sport. Chloe sighed, understanding the problem. Finally.

“So what’s the next step? What’s the next uniquely twisted location Chloe Price plus Rachel Amber equal?” She tried to joke, just to earn herself more time to think. She was actually overthinking the possibilities, trying to remember any remotely important thing they wanted to do together in the future, but except mornings in bed, freshly brewed coffee and kisses, she couldn’t find anything to hold on to.

Breakfasts and kisses would be nice anyway.

“Well… I don’t know.” Rachel didn’t want to look at her. “I can’t really… We can’t just pack and go. We can eventually, but… Graduating maybe… would be a… good idea I guess.”

“For both of us?” Chloe looked obviously concerned. Going back to school wasn’t at the top of her list. Hell, it wasn’t on the list at all to be honest. This idea wasn’t bad though. Just a little something to rely on and make a use of the time they had until a better plan or idea would form. Books, classes, more Arcadia Bay, bell rings, rules, more rules and people. New people who would like to know Rachel more, and would be in love with her, leaving love letters in her locker and… damn she’s selfish.

“If you want to…” Rachel added sheepishly.

“We can think about it. My mother would be fucking happy and you would be a goldstar girlfriend if you forced me to get back onto the path of education and knowledge….” Chloe couldn’t believe her words, but it was for the best.

“I’m not gonna force you, Chloe. I just, you know… think…” Rachel still didn’t dare to look at her girlfriend. “I just want something ordinary for us… Not extremely wild. I would like to just calm down a little… We went through so much, that… I just need something we can build on.” She felt very uncomfortable with her own thoughts. “I mean… It sounds stupid…”
“It doesn’t.”

“I just really want to be with you.”

“I know.” Famous Price’s helpful sentences during desperate conversations.

When Chloe had jumped on her truck and driven here, she expected a small fight, maybe an argument, maybe even a hot make out session, but this time she was bewildered, to say the least.

“So, school it is. We can at least graduate and then... we will see, right?” She finally agreed, without a single sign of enthusiasm or mere excitement.

Rachel nodded with resignation. It wasn’t exactly what they had planned or dreamed, but living in limbo didn’t help before and wasn’t an outstanding alternative. Getting back to school sounded tacky and coarse, like treason or betrayal. A free spirit leading another one to the most hated institution ever. Rachel felt a huge wave of disappointment, imaginary or not, emitted from the blue-eyed girl.

“Hey…” Chloe lifted her chin, looking into her eyes. “Hey, it’s ok, really.” She wrapped her in the smell of her leather jacket and cheap soap, embraced with the weakening smoke of a cigarette. “We will be fine.”

They were standing there for a long moment, until the stars sparkled the sky and the clouds shimmered from the moon behind them. The lighthouse’s outline dominated the space, throwing a long, dark shadow around. They hid in the darkness exchanging short kisses from time to time, like this moment was supposed to last forever.

“I love you, Chloe…” Rachel’s whisper brushed her ear.

“I love you too, Rachel.” Her girl hugged her closer.

The future didn’t look that ugly anymore.

“I’m gonna call my dad now.” Rachel sneaked out from her arms and dragged out her phone. She scrolled through her contact book slowly, but knew the phone number by heart anyway. Even after all those years. “Do you have a smoke?”

Chloe had one, of course. And a lighter; fucking full blue-haired service. Rachel lit the smoke up and inhaled, still looking at her phone. It was already dark, so the screen was the only source of light, except for the orange sparks of the cigarette.

“I need a moment” She finally tapped on the contact list and walked away, with the phone by her ear. Chloe was watching her carefully, surrounded by darkness and the monotonous song of the crickets. She learned years ago that when Rachel needed space you have to step back. Otherwise things get smashy. It wasn’t hard to guess why she was smoking too.

She tried not to listen and not get any snippets of the conversation, but Rachel didn’t go that far, and after a few minutes the talk first warmed up from a whisper to a firm tone, and then escalated to an angry hiss and a few yells. Chloe sighed, tilting her head. It was better to focus on crickets and the sounds of the crashing waves below anyway.

Rachel came back vexed, annoyed and with a blush on her cheeks, throwing her phone into the cabin of the truck. Her anger was barely visible regarding the time of the day, but Chloe knew her too well. Rachel’s mood switched radically. She was quiet and anxious the whole afternoon. Now, she looked outraged.
“How did it go?” Chloe asked casually, leaning on the car nonchalantly. “Did Rachel Amber finally tell her father she’s not interested in any of his customers’ handsome sons?”

“How fucking funny. Do you really have to keep up with the gay thing? Fine.” Rachel jumped on the truck’s bed, and sat by her girl while combing her hair with her fingers. “Rachel Amber finally decided to tell her father she is not interested in anybody else except you… If you really must know. “


“I’m not fucking joking, Price. He was talking mostly about money, so…” She dropped her head as the tears danced on her eyelashes. “How much do I need, how much do I spend, how much do I owe. Veni, vidi, cash, cash, cash.” She took one more smoke from Chloe’s pack. She was smoking too much, but right now the whole carton wouldn’t be enough. She wouldn’t mind a simple fix, just for tonight, just to forget.

She brushed off the thought, hard.

“They asked how I feel, how everything is going. I mentioned school, they seemed pleasant and they asked me to get back to them to California.”

“What?”

“You heard me. They are in Long Beach now anyway. They bought a house and a boat, starting a new amazing chapter in their lives and graciously asked me to join them. I was like… all right, but do you have two one way tickets or just one? Because, you know I WILL have company. And – bear with me – there came the moment I mentioned you. I told you it would happen, I fucking told you. And you were like nah, they just wanted to check on you.” Angry Rachel was amazingly intense. Angry Rachel mocking Chloe was beyond the normal capacity of intensity. “They… Well, he ignored whatever I wanted to say, of course. With all his diplomacy, he just started talking about how beautiful the beach is, how amazing the new house looks and how they even prepared a room for me, the merciful master of the fucking universe. I was like, alright dad, I got it. Did you get me a double bed then, or a fucking queen? Because if I’m ever gonna visit this house, I will be with my girlfriend.”

“You didn’t say it.” Chloe couldn’t imagine saying it to Joyce, not even David. They were still walking on thin ice with Rachel not sleeping on the couch, but there was no real argument or constructive discussion about it. Sometimes they mentioned something here and there asking uncomfortable questions, making her eras painfully itchy, but nothing direct. Overall, they just decided to look concerned every time they saw the girls together or holding hands, but pretended to be entirely unfamiliar with the truth, even if the facts were thrown in their faces every single day.

“Oh fuck, yes I did. He fucking provoked me. It wasn’t my intention to actually argue about furniture arrangements. I don’t give a shit about that house, boat or a fucking swimming pool. He ignored me again, of course, he didn’t want to listen and jumped to his dearest subject of all. Money. How much, when, how, check, cash, credit card, dollars or foreign currency. Money. Like they could buy me back…” She was too infuriated to start crying, but it hurt. Really hurt.

Chloe was waiting with a lit up smoke between her lips and arms around Rachel’s shoulders. It was like a desperate, yet loving attempt to tame down a flame. It was barely working but was too tempting not to try.

“I told him, politely, fucking politely, that thank you, it would be nice just to cut your mom a check, since I live under your roof and eat from your table…”
“You really didn’t have to.”

“Fuck yes I did. Shut up. And I confirmed, politely again, mind you, then I won’t be moving to California, thank you very much. And then it started.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “That I’m irresponsible, too young, too fragile, had changed too much, made too many mistakes, I hurt them on purpose, I’m a terrible mess and I just need some stability in my life. They were willing to provide this stability of course, if I just leave Arcadia Bay and start bending to their rules. Again.”

“And?” Chloe’s chest was aching a little bit. Maybe it was the cold wind from the bay, or she smoked too fast. Being afraid of another possibility of Rachel leaving her was unbearable. Her Santa Monica dream was so close, so… reachable.

“And fuck no, I’m not going anywhere without you, you dumbass!” Rachel frowned. “What the fuck did you think? Rachel fixed, Rachel can go? What the fuck, Price?”

Chloe didn’t know what to say, so just decided to kiss her instead. Surprisingly her girlfriend pushed her back lightly, sneaking out of her arms.

“Not now. When I finish.” Rachel choked. “Anyway… No California for me anytime soon. He got fucking mad and started yelling that he would come here and force me to go, kidnap me or something. Oh, I’m so sorry, he can’t since I’m not a minor anymore. And then we’re getting to your favorite subject, Price. Being gay. Happy? He was so progressive he generously would be able to accept my lifestyle, like I care, but…”

“But without me.”

“Congratulations, miss Price. You just won the fucking asshole diamond trophy. A fucking piñata filled with shit. But it got better, really. You won’t believe this. His clients breed not only handsome sons but also beautiful daughters, so If I want he can introduce me to a proper group of people, adequate to my social status, whatever the fuck it meant. And stop panicking Price, I told him to fuck off.”

Chloe started to realize that Rachel had just given up going back to her favorite place on earth just because she couldn’t go there without her. She easily rejected all the luxurious temptations, long evenings on the beach, cocktail parties, or whatever they call them there, with the hottest citizens on planet earth, not to mention pockets filled with cash. She wanted to get back there for a good four years now, and she just turned down this chance so easily… Chloe’s throat got scratchy, her chest felt heavy and her eyes were itching as hell.

“Well, all those beautiful hot Californian girls tanning by the swimming pool…” She muttered feeling embarrassed and puzzled. It was one of the most bizarre moments in her entire life. Someone was willing to sacrifice their dreams for her. It felt astonishingly good.

“Can you be serious just for one fucking minute?” Rachel hissed. “And stop daydreaming.”

Chloe allowed herself to show one single smirk before getting serious again. She was indeed daydreaming, but only about one Cali girl though.

“…And that was it.” Rachel tried to calm down her breath, but was simply too angry.

“You skipped some parts.” Chloe looked at her carefully, sending a shy smile. “Those lines when he was telling you what a terrible person I am.”

“I skipped on purpose. There is nothing worth repeating. Now fucking kiss me.”
Her girlfriend respectfully obeyed the command, and it was a kiss she missed the whole day. If she was really selfish and reckless she would ask Rachel to call her dad daily, just to get this one passionate caress every single evening.

Rachel bit her neck, moaned, crashed her lips with hers again. Dragging her closer, she was kissing her passionately like there was no tomorrow. Chloe responded joyfully and willingly, providing all her desire and longing. They hadn’t kissed like that in days and even an hour without feeling her girl close seemed like a painful torture for Chloe Price. She was addicted to this fire, to those scratches on her back, to the sparkles in those hazel eyes and half open ravishing lips. She tried a rehab once. It didn’t work out.

Chloe wasn’t the only one longing. Rachel was always direct and straightforward, so she didn’t hide her intentions trying to drag her girl onto the truck’s bed. She wrapped her legs around Chloe’s waist at the same time, pressing her hips closer. It made the whole operation way more complicated, but you don’t expect a fire to burn constructively. She ripped off her girlfriend’s beanie and threw it somewhere, just to tangle her blue hair freely, make a mess - this sweet passionate mess Chloe missed so much.

Kissing Rachel was always messy.

Chloe crawled on the truck, half stumbling and half blind with passion, wishing she could have a blanket or anything else to protect Rachel from the rusty metal, but it was too late anyway. She heard her jacket getting unzipped, one fast whisper, and the kisses and bites on her neck got even more intense.

“Rach…” she moaned, noticing she was indeed lying on her girlfriend, wrapped in her arms and legs, feeling how ready and hungry she was. Chloe kept promising herself that the very next time would be in a proper bed, with a proper romantic atmosphere, candles, roses and all that shit, but somehow there was never enough time or the right place. She would be strong though, it’s just kissing. Her hand was now under Rachel’s shirt and she found herself pushing against her lips to kiss her even harder. How did it happen? She couldn’t control herself. This time for good.

When Rachel felt her touch on her bare skin, her whole body tightened, and her mind curled to one single thought. “What are you doing to me…” She choked on her own whisper, wanting more and more of this touch, of those hands and fingers.

“Do you want me to stop?” Chloe asked, not expecting any answer and not willing to terminate what was coming anyway unless Rachel would really want to stop her of course, but it would never fucking happen. She had been waiting too long and all hell had already broken lose.

“Please don’t stop…” A quiet begging whisper, directly into her ear, and Rachel’s hands were on her back, nails scratching, teeth marking her neck, shoulders, lips. It was too much and yet it would be never enough. Chloe broke the kiss, took of her jacket—shit—almost ripped her own clothes off. She got tangled herself in her own bra, helplessly trying to get rid of it as well, looking like a very desperate imprisoned butterfly, but the moment passed quickly and she was kissing her Rachel again, responding to every whisper, every moan and every wish.

Even if Chloe had a hidden agenda of being slow and careful, it all burned down the same moment Rachel took off her shirt, fast and hurrying, then dragging her closer again. Her girl liked to burn things down, she was a hella experienced arsonist; a dangerous one, especially when she really needed something. Chloe was lucky though, they both were in need.

Rachel was rushing so much that she didn’t even notice getting a broken nail while unbuckling Chloe’s belt and then freeing herself from the same obstacle. She took over, no questions asked, as
she had done many times before. But when there were no barriers, no drawbacks between them, only their touch and rough rusted metal below, she withdrew slowly letting Chloe to take control. It was a huge sacrifice on her part and it didn’t go unnoticed.

It was way too late to be tender and slow. Especially for Chloe. She took her hard, and fast, faster, and the way Rachel responded, how she answered, blew her mind away. Her moans, barely audible at first, grew, strengthened, got louder, while melting under every single touch and stroke. Holding Chloe closer, dragging her on herself, moving her hips around her hand, she let herself go completely.

Chloe always thought that ‘fucking your brains out’ was a meaningless expression. Damn, she was wrong. Rachel’s impatience wasn’t restricted only to her own being. She was drunk and high on Chloe, the best high in the world, and wanted to make her hers again, imprint her again with everything she had. Feeling how eager and sensitive Chloe was to her touch, made her more desperate. She was yours, only yours, now and fucking forever, she couldn’t think anymore, she didn’t have to. What’s thinking anyway? Who needs it? Chloe didn’t even notice scratching her elbow so hard on some rusty metal piece that left a bloody mark.

They say passion should be dosed carefully, but there was anything but carefulness right now.

Just before the world exploded, Rachel forced herself to open her eyes and look at Chloe. Her sight was wild and frantic, she barely could see anything, but she wanted to see her face, and the storm of blue hair when coming.

It was hard, beyond hard.

It took them a moment to be able to speak again. Longer than ever before.

“Holy shit.”

“Right?” Rachel was gazing at the starry sky, trying to catch her breath. Her eyes were wide open, her hair was tangled and her heart couldn’t stop racing. She looked at her girlfriend who was clearly trying to put herself back together. Rachel reached for Chloe’s chapped lips, her fingers danced on them, still feeling the desire in every gasp of air.

Their eyes met and no words were necessary. Any kind of spoken language was only an obstacle from living this moment. Living to the fullest.

The moment had passed exactly when they started to get cold. Oregon summer can be very cold, especially on top of a cliff while you are lying on a metal piece of trash and there is literally nothing between your body and the cool ocean breeze - except for your significant other, of course.

“That was really something.” Rachel whispered finally. She turned to Chloe, covering herself with all the clothes she could grab around. Modesty wasn’t her first and leading motivation, but in Chloe’s eyes she looked as innocent as ever. The sudden movement rocked the truck a little bit, producing a series of squeaks and hollow sounds. This truck had seen a lot, but nothing that wild before. Chloe had to smile, still overwhelmed and damn fucking happy.

She had missed her. It had been too long.

They had shared a few moments of intimacy in the famous bathroom stall of a restaurant a couple weeks ago, but it was not even half that passionate. Chloe stopped her girlfriend in the last moment, excusing herself with a promise she had made. It was an excuse indeed. They were avoiding any kind of temptation since then, treating the situation as an accidental encounter and nothing that
mattered. Not only because of the addiction or the rehab, not only because the next time was supposed to be fully romantic in the worst tacky soap-opera style, but Chloe was still trying to process Rachel’s affair with Frank. She didn’t joke about her heart breaking into a thousand pieces and it obliviously also affected the tension between them. It was frustrating, hurtful, painful sometimes, but Rachel somehow managed to wait. She knew it was her fault anyway, so she didn’t push. Not hard anyway.

These weeks of forced celibacy changed Rachel Amber, made her think things over. She used sex as a tool to control, and it was frustrating not to be able to, not to bribe Chloe with another seductive kiss or with a sweet promise of another passionate night. She was stripped from her power, not being able to act on the temptation, even her own so to speak. She didn’t give up completely though, sensing an almost visible tension unconsciously, but the wait made her sore inside and out. Mentally and physically.

The intimacy was a taboo for a long time and even if they were sleeping in the same bed and tried to make out, Chloe was always stopping at some point. Rachel had to give up so many times, couldn’t force herself to pressure her girlfriend, too scared and afraid that she would lose her forever. They were joking about sex, provoking, testing the waters, inviting, tempting and playing with the idea, but Rachel found herself too frightened to ask directly or even demand, like she had liked to do in their good old days.

“Are we back on track?” Now she finally asked, watching Chloe silently to this moment. It sounded nonchalant, but she was damn nervous. If Chloe decided to avoid her again, she would seriously consider howling to the fucking moon.

“Stop reading my mind, Amber. It’s fucking creepy.” Came the response, spiced with a stupid, dumb happy smile.

“I can’t help it.” Rachel tenderly kissed the top of her nose. “I’m sorry if the question was… Too far?”

“No.” Chloe’s voice was pleasantly raspy. Rachel couldn’t help but smirk. She kissed Chloe again, slowly this time. It was nice not to rush after all. She might have learned a thing or two through those two months.

“Why did I ever think it was a good idea in the first place?” Chloe covered her eyes with her arms, gasping with frustration. Her elbow was still bleeding a little.

“You were hurt, baby.” Her girlfriend tried to cover her as much as she could with two pairs of pants, shirts and a jacket. It looked more like a homeless guy’s dream than a love nest, but it was the thought that counted. “You are still hurting. My fucking fault. I’m sorry if I was too direct.”

“You fucking were. But fuck it. Damn. Well... yeah... Fuck. The hell...” Chloe mumbled still covering her face.

“We are very literate tonight, aren’t we?” Rachel rested her head on her hand, while still drawing on her girlfriend’s chest with other palm, slowly moving her fingers around her neck, breasts, belly button. Chloe didn’t even try to cover herself, so no one could blame Rachel Amber for taking advantage of the situation.

“I can’t think. It’s your fault.” Another blue-haired mumble.

“This blame I can always take.” Rachel was laughing. Finally, and freely. If there was anything to make her feel complete, it was her embarrassed and shy girlfriend lying on front of her, covered only
by a few scraps of clothes and the star light.

Dressing up is always harder, more difficult and requires way more movements than taking all the clothes off. Rachel started the uncomfortable procedure, and Chloe followed after a short moment of hesitation. They finally collected all the pieces, laughing and joking, and Rachel finally was able to look into Chloe’s eyes.

“You’re beautiful.” She said simply, watching in awe as Chloe Price was reaching her limit of blushing. Her girlfriend never knew how to respond to compliments, fake or real, and this time wasn’t different.

“I mean it.” Rachel stopped Chloe’s hand reaching for a smoke, and then turned her face to meet her eyes. “You are. I’m fucking lucky that I’m yours.”

The usual response would be “fuck you, Rachel”, but Chloe was really seriously and dangerously speechless. She just brushed a tangled lock of hair from Rachel’s face, not sure what to do with herself.

“How did you survive?” She asked suddenly, trying an old tactic of changing the topic slightly. The question sounded as random as thunder on a sunny day.

“Survive what exactly?” Rachel got suspicious, but tilted her head playfully. She was still in a flirtatious mood.

“Sleeping with me in the same bed, under the same blanket and not being able to fuck me.” Chloe blurted out, finally being able to light up a cigarette. Her hands were still shaking and all her clothes felt unusually heavy.

“It’s called making love, you dumbass.” Rachel smirked lightly, also grabbing a smoke.

“Is it really? Did you buy a new dictionary or something?” The old cocky and rebellious Chloe was back.

“Chloe, even when I’m fucking you, it’s really making love. And close your mouth, you look silly.” She smiled and exhaled the smoke. Chloe tilted her head and murmured something, focusing on her lighter. “Did you mumble something important and wise, or was that just one those after-sounds?”

Rachel was obviously pleased with the whole situation. Pleased, satisfied and happy.

“I said you didn’t answer my question!”

“What question? Ah… Well, it was hard and fucking torturous but I deserved it. Some actions have consequences unfortunately. Fucking Chloe Price was tempting me every night, especially with those Star Wars PJ pants.” Chloe was more than adorable while embarrassed. “But I’ve never promised you to be a good girl though. I could always touch myself, you dork. Of course, after you fell asleep.”

“You were what?”

“I’m gonna buy you this dictionary for your birthday.” Rachel sighed, to hide a playful laugh. “You tempted a girl, so the girl had to work her way out, right? You were kissing me goodnight, even making out with me and then passing out. What the fuck did you think? That I will take a cold shower every single time? Joyce would have killed me after seeing the water bill. I’ve never woken you up though. You know how loud I can get, so…” She waved the smoke off her face, with an alluring smile. “Yes, you have the right to be impressed.”
Chloe wasn’t that sure about it, she wasn’t sure about anything at the moment. She vaguely remembered some quiet moans between one dream and another, but since her nights were filled with dreams containing very mature content she didn’t pay very much attention to it.

“Should I wake you up the next time?” Asking Rachel to stop teasing was like asking the weather to change.

Chloe looked at her with such fire, and Rachel’s heart started racing again. “I think you won’t have any strength for it.” She responded slowly. “But if you do… damn right you have to wake me up. To watch at least.”

There was another moment of temptation. The night got pretty warm again—more like sweating hot.

Chloe’s phone vibrated on the metal board with a terrible, horrid sound. Once, twice, and then the damn thing couldn’t stop buzzing. She really tried to ignore it, but the noise was too profound.

“Pick up, for fuck’s sake.” Rachel rolled her eyes.

“It’s a text. Texts. Plural.” Chloe was checking impatiently, ready to throw the phone away and get back to the more important thing. Then her hand slowed down, scrolling though the messages again and again, back and forth, not trusting her own ability to read. She shook her head, narrowing her eyes, and her whole being was silently asking “What the fuck?”

“What’s wrong?” Rachel ditched the smoke, concerned a little bit. Chloe was the last person on earth to lose herself over her phone. It had to be important, and in their case, important usually equaled worrying.

“You’re not gonna believe it.”

Rachel frowned, and asked for more explanation with a wide gesture.

“Max is here. She’s waiting for us at home.” Chloe was reading the messages wide eyed.

“What?”
Chloe parked the truck carelessly, hitting the breaks as hard as possible. The old tires howled, ramming the uncut grass and the concrete pavement, crossing the sidewalk and almost hitting the mailbox. She never paid that much attention to parking anyway, preferring to drive fast - as fast as possible. It was her rusty, shaky way to be free, though with killer carbon emissions but she loved this car. Parking usually meant getting back to ordinary things, to boring normal life, except the moments when she was accompanied by Rachel Amber.

Life was never boring with her, one way or another. Not anymore.

She looked at her beautiful girlfriend and had to smirk. Rachel’s eyes were still sparkling, her cheeks still painted with a fragile blush and lips half open, prepared to kiss.

So, Rachel got a kiss. And then another, and then one more, deep, passionate, with Chloe’s hand on her waist pulling the girl closer. It was Rachel’s fault anyway, since she willingly responded with the same amount of hunger, striving for more. Somebody should stop them. Really. They had to be stopped. Chloe’s touch got even more impatient, restless and yearning, but the blonde finally took over, pushing her away gently and taking off her girlfriend’s hands from her breasts. Chloe had no idea how she got that far. And when. What a fucking surprise.

It was Rachel’s fault, really.

“Damn Price, you had me once today, now you can’t take your hands off me.” Her girlfriend tried to joke, but her whole body was still tense and longing. Technically, she was teasing. Practically, she just wanted to jump on Chloe’s lap and ask her to take her again.

“Shut up.” Chloe’s eyebrow rose, while the lips trembled in a devilish smile. “Look who is talking now.”

“Chloe…” Rachel’s breath was short, sweet and hot. Still. “We have to go. You didn’t rush through the whole town just to eat me up in front of your parents’ garage.”

“All right.” It was true. Chloe sighed and hit the driving wheel hard. It hurt, but was a much-needed wake up call. “I’m fucking nervous.” She didn’t have to explain. Seeing Max after all those months after the crazy week they had spent together and some sparks that were flying was the last thing she wished for. Not in general though. She missed her old friend, but now it seemed out of place. And time.

“Yeah, me too.” Rachel murmured quietly. They were thinking about the same thing, the same surprising guest. A reckless wonder.

“C’mon baby.” She always called Chloe baby, exactly when needed. Rachel had this amazing ability of unconsciously sensing the moment when her girlfriend’s inner teddy bear was making a huge yet visible comeback, trashing the confident and tough persona she showed up every day. “I’m with you.”

That was partly why Chloe was nervous but bit her lip. Max was here, waiting at her mom’s kitchen, drinking strawberry tea and telling stories of her other, foreign life. Pleasant and sweet as always, she was probably also engaging her parents in an interesting conversation about non-interesting things. Chloe always wanted Rachel to meet Max, but maybe not exactly after she had confessed about a small make out session with her former best friend, and not after they had just ended up on the truck
bed fucking like no tomorrow. It was pretty scary just to imagine how Rachel could react. She was all soft and loving now, but her mood was unpredictable.

Rachel was pretty much aware of how much Max meant to the blue-haired love of her life and probably always will. She almost forgot about Chloe’s moments of weakness, mostly because she was even more guilty of more profound deeds. She was torn between jealousy and curiosity, still spiced up in her own not fully fulfilled desire, and the last thing she could think about was a family dinner.

The blond girl smiled at her thoughts, remembering their first kiss, serious and passionate, and the torture of a desperate polite table conversation with her parents, that had happened not a long time after. She remembered Chloe’s hands shaking so much, her eyes always on her, the awkward jokes and continuous effort to verbally survive. Everything had seemed so complicated back then, yet it had been way simpler than now.

They finally got out of the car, opening the rusted doors, slipping out from the patched seats and dived into the chilly night. Chloe hesitated, tempted to smoke one more before entering the house, but it would be suspicious and stupid and it was already late. She could always smoke after… or maybe now would be better. Oh, damn she was nervous.

“We have to go, baby.” Rachel rushed her, grabbing her hand firmly and dragging her slowly to the door. Chloe’s excitement prevailed over her fear, so finally she gave up and walked into the house following her girl.

“Mom, David, we’re home!” She yelled a little bit too loud. Joyce lurked at them from the kitchen corner, wearing her favorite apron and wiping her hands in a towel, in the middle of a cooking battle. She studied the girls for a moment and then shook her head. Chloe could bet that her mother was avoiding her eyes, moving around a little bit more uncomfortably than a second before like a sudden realization that something had just bitten her in the neck. But why would her mom be embarrassed?

“Where were you?” Joyce asked with concern but also barely visible irony. Almost sneeringly.

“What took you so long?”

“Long? It wasn’t that long.” Chloe glanced at the hands of the clock and frowned in surprise. It was almost midnight. “Sorry mom, we lost track of time.”

Her eyes went to Rachel and then she understood her mother’s suspicious gaze. Her girlfriend’s hair was tangled, her clothes a mess, her belt not properly buckled, her shirt creased and unbuttoned, or buttoned wrongly. Chloe groaned with a painful realization that another serious talk would happen pretty soon. Rachel blushed shyly, with the same comprehension, but it was way too late for putting everything in order, so she hid behind her last resort – an innocent and cute smile.

“I’ve noticed.” Joyce gave them another, clearly warning look. “Come to the table, dinner is ready, and you have a guest.”

They slowly walked to the living room, filled with the smell of a home cooked dish, family and safety. Even the fireplace was burning, adding more natural, gentle light to the pleasantly lit area and making the space even more comfy.

And there, by the table, between a pile of photos, negatives, family albums and numerous magazines, on one side was David and on the other was Max, casually talking to Chloe’s step-dad. They were apparently in the middle of a very interesting conversation and it was going well, judging by David’s smile and his head nods as he listened to every word spoken by the tiny girl.
Max hadn’t changed much. Adorable freckles still populated her cheeks and cute little nose, but her eyes showed way more confidence, strength and self-esteem than even before. She also looked tired, but despite the actual hour and long trip from Seattle, she was hiding it pretty well. Well-mannered, soft, sweet and adorable at the same time, Max smiled at seeing Chloe, got up and apologized to David with a few short words to break up the discussion.

“Mad Max!” Chloe jumped to her, leaving Rachel behind, and hugged the girl as tight as possible. “Damn, you’re really here!”

“Chloe! It’s great to see you too!” Max’s voice was calm and steady. She happily embraced her friend, never wanting to let her go. “I thought I would have to wait the whole night to greet you home!”

“I’m sorry, we got... just carried away...” Chloe looked at her girlfriend with the most beautiful smile anybody’d ever seen and reached for her hand subconsciously. Joyce and David exchanged knowing looks. He frowned a little, Joyce shook her head again.

“I hope I didn’t disturb your plans or anything.” Max curiously looked at Rachel, who was still patiently waiting to be introduced, yet took Chloe’s hand and embraced it with hers desperately.

“Where are my manners!” Chloe pulled Rachel closer, too eagerly, too fast and with too much intensity so her girlfriend almost stumbled but miraculously was able to save her dignity and maneuver out with grace. The situation was drastically escalating into an awkward one. Not that that was uncommon with the company of her loved one, but she truly hoped for a quick turn of events. Chloe didn’t notice, looking at both girls, her past and her future who met finally face to face. Her eyes were switching from Rachel to Max, like watching a tennis match, waiting for the reaction. But the game was still hers, she was about to serve.

“Max, I would like you to meet…” Chloe hesitated on which description she should use. She actually never had to introduce Rachel to anybody; everybody knew her, everybody loved her and she was usually the only one to be dragged out from the shadows. Chloe stammered a bit, panicking and her face changed from semi-blue to reddish. “My... my... love of my life... Rachel... Eee… Amber.”

She was an idiot. Chloe Price was miserably aware of it.

She was agonizingly sure the punishment for saying “eee Amber” would come later. Damn, her mother will kill her, David will kill her, but it’s nothing compared to what Rachel will do to her. It concerned her even more than first ever public expression of her own feelings. It was so natural she didn’t give a single thought to it.

“Hi Max,” Rachel was way more natural than Chloe expected. “I heard a lot about you.”

“I can’t wait to hear about you.” Max smiled when Rachel hugged her. She probably expected a hand shake, but after that kind of introduction it would be even more uneasy.

They stood there for a moment, both of them with their guard up, careful and skeptical, but finally the ice was broken.

“There is a lot I want to tell you about!” Chloe said and then shut up immediately, knowing very well it didn’t sound right. Saying dirty things in front of her family was her specialty after all. She almost felt Rachel sighing, but her girlfriend was apparently more amused than angry.

“All right girls, let’s eat! The food is getting cold.” Joyce saved the day, as usual.
They finally sat at the table, ready for a very late meal. Chloe’s mom didn’t disappoint serving the mashed potatoes, green beans, waffles and fried chicken. It didn’t take them long to empty their plates, and - in Chloe and David’s case, ask for more and empty them again.

The talk between one chew and another bite was sporadic. Joyce was an excellent cook, so it was common not to entertain each other with small talk, since everything smelled and tasted delightful, tempting and asking to be devoured. Max had to take a lot of questions though, mostly courteous, and she responded to all of them gracefully. They spoke about the Caulfield’s, Max’s parents, their new jobs and plans for the future which interested Joyce, and about Seattle’s attractions, living big, which let Rachel to share some memories she collected visiting the Emerald City long time ago. All the photography stuff and equipment topics were already discussed apparently, and Chloe took it with a huge relief that she could avoid the emotional confessions about tripods, lenses or any other thing remotely related to taking photos. Not that she minded hearing about it, but no one was able to keep up with Max’s enthusiasm during those sorts of discussions and she was quickly the only person knowing what the debate was about.

When the famous cherry pie finally landed on the table, Joyce looked at Max and whispered loud enough for everybody to hear it.

“Tell them the big news Maxine!”

“What news?” Chloe was almost in half way through her piece and almost gaged on another bite. Rachel tried to calm her down stroking her thigh under the table, but obviously it only made the situation worse. Chloe coughed and literally had to fight for another breath. It could be part one of the punishment she had sensed before.

“I got a scholarship in Blackwell Academy.” Max said shyly. She never pried on her success stories, even if she collected so many. “They’re starting this new photography program with some amazing and experienced teachers and I got in!” She looked at the familiar faces, extremely content. “I’m moving back to Arcadia Bay!”

Rachel froze. Chloe stopped chewing. Joyce clapped her hands cheerfully like a soccer mom during the first game ever, David muttered something encouraging, stuck to his plate. He was the only person at the table who didn’t stop shoveling food into his mouth.

“That’s great! Amazing! Congrats Maximus!” Chloe said finally, spitting the crumbs everywhere, still trying to process a huge piece of cherry pie. Her speech was barely understandable. “When are you gonna start?”

“In the fall, Chloe. That’s when usually school starts. I just came here to fill out the rest of the papers, see the dorms and... you know... stuff.” The last part sounded interestingly bashful. Rachel stared at Max with a questioning smile, but the girl didn’t decide to elaborate.

“That’s hella awesome! We can even take some classes together!” Chloe’s enthusiasm carried her way too far.

Rachel sighed and shook her head. Her girlfriend had this annoying ability to load on any kind of important news at once and without preparation, especially when she was anxious or unsure. Not that it was the worst news of all, but she would prefer to save Joyce from a heart attack. It was also a little bit rude to Max, because everybody’s attention switched at once.

“What?” Her mother straightened up in her chair, not really believing the words she heard.

“I will tell you later.” Chloe finally drank up some water so she could finally speak freely. Her mouth
was still full, but she managed to pronounce words properly this time. The wish that her parents weren’t so strict about the legal age of drinking during family meetings was still tragically unfulfilled.

“Are you going back to school?” Max was also surprised, but way less shocked. This idea was interesting. It actually felt nice and reassuring.

“Yeah, we...” Chloe dropped her fork with a loud metallic noise and squeezed Rachel’s hand instead, leaving sweet and sticky marks on her palm. She looked at her with unconditional love, still chewing. “We decided to graduate together. You can’t run away from this shit your whole life, right?”

The room, previously filled with sounds of clicking tables and rattling utensils got silent. The only noise was the crackling flame burning down wooden branches at the fireplace. Even David stopped eating.

“You made her do that?” Joyce’s eyes were round and wide open, when she looked at Rachel. She wasn’t sure her daughter was actually joking, invented another way to prank the whole family, or just tried to impress or distract her guest. Trusting Chloe’s words in that matter seemed absurd.

Rachel, so far mostly silent and respectfully quiet, tilted her head smiling lightly.

“I might have something do to with it.”

If that was supposed to put the situation back to normal somehow it didn’t work. Actually, the silence deepened and tensed even more. Chloe blushed again, wondering if her mother connected the dots between the feverish smiles and fast breaths when they had come back home and the education news she just served. If so, maybe she wouldn’t be murdered by her own parents? Or, it wouldn’t be less painful, at least.

She really needed another piece of this cake. Sugar was very helpful. The cherry pie was her lifesaver right now.

“All right.” Max finally decided it was time for her to go. She wasn’t far off though. “Thank you so much for your hospitality, but it’s already super late and I still gotta get to my hotel.”

“Hotel? Maxine! You should have told us!” Joyce protested as expected, getting up and trying to stop their guest from leaving. It was all a courtesy, but her intentions were really sincere. “We would prepare the couch for you, no problem at all!”

“Since no one is using it anyway.” David murmured, losing the fight over the last piece of the cherry pie.

It was time for Rachel to blush, so she just tucked her hair and tried to look innocent, which usually worked, but she failed badly this time. Guilty as charged she focused on her glass of water, drinking with long, thirsty gulps.

“It’s really fine Joyce, I wanted to surprise you anyway!” Max hugged Chloe’s mom and shook her head. “I will let you guys know next time, I promise! By the way, can you recommend a cab service? I was planning to take an Uber, but it’s not like super popular in Arcadia Bay...”

“Nothing modern is.”

“I will drive you.” David offered, getting up heavily. He seriously had eaten half of the food and barely could move. “Don’t worry.”
“That would be great, thank you!”

Max probably expected Chloe to give her a ride, but hid her disappointment quickly. Her former friend didn’t say anything, avoiding eye contact. It had to be concerning, but both Max and Rachel suspected why.

The past and the future of Chloe Price looked at each other, crossed their gaze and no words were necessary. Rachel smiled nicely, but deep down she was still a little bit afraid. Max getting back to Chloe’s life, to their life, was a big question mark.

“Max, wait! I will walk you to the car!” The blue-haired definition of awkwardness offered finally, and followed her step-father and her friend to the door. It forced her to release Rachel’s hand, which she desperately held almost the whole time.

The blonde’s palm felt suddenly empty.

“It was very nice to meet you.” She seized the opportunity of giving Max a goodbye hug. This time she wasn’t that tense and was way more relaxed. The girl smiled back and kept the embrace a tad longer than expected.

“It was a pleasure! We have to hang out sometime!”

“We will!” Rachel had no doubts about it, but actually the idea grew on her. She actually might like this girl a lot, or try to like her at least. All her fears and nervousness, carefully hidden inside, were fading out. At least for now.

Chloe gave her a quick kiss on the lips and there they went; the door slammed and the front yard got filled with laughter and rushed steps.

Rachel, left alone, cleaned the table, filled the dishwasher, packed all the leftovers putting them in the fridge. Joyce wasn’t around since she wished Max goodnight. The blonde wasn’t up for another confrontation tonight, wishing her girlfriend to come back inside as soon as possible. Rachel wasn’t sure if Chloe’s mom would like to discuss any issues with her tonight, but she wanted to be careful.

When everything was done, Rachel snuck out for a smoke in the back garden, grateful for still being left alone. She carefully closed the back door, leaned on the wall and stood in the darkness, accompanied only by her thoughts. The evening was still nippy, more so at this hour, but Rachel didn’t mind a cold breeze. It was a busy day, forged in fire, arguments and passion. It felt good to experience the crisp of Arcadia Bay’s embrace.

“Rachel?” She heard a voice just by the back door. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Yes, Joyce, of course.” She grabbed the handle, pulling as hard as she could. The door needed fixing, it wasn’t easy to open it. Then she took a few steps back, trying not to stand in Joyce’s way.

“Do you want something to drink?” Chloe’s mother was thinking about everything and everybody, as always. Rachel bit her choppy lips, shaking her head.

“No thank you, I’m good.”

The older woman stepped into the darkness with a glass of apple juice in her hand. The door moved back with a hollow, horrid noise. It wasn’t a pleasant sound, and Rachel got a little bit anxious again.

Chloe’s mother stood by her side, looking at the stars and slowly drinking her non-alcoholic vice. It was an Oregon summer night in all its glory and greatness and not even a single cloud was disturbing
the view.

They didn’t talk, didn’t exchange a single word. The only sounds around were the crickets nearby, a sip of a juice from time to time, and an inhale of a smoke. It should’ve felt strange and uncommon, but there was warmth, a sense of family and sympathy in this silence.

“You father called again today.” Joyce spoke finally, not even looking at Rachel.

“Yes, Chloe told me. I talked to him already. Thank you for the info though.”

“I’m glad you both sorted the things out.” It sounded like an invitation to another discussion about the subject Rachel despised the most.

“Yeah, kinda.” She summarized awkwardly.

Joyce wasn’t stupid. She knew nothing was sorted in this situation, but thankfully didn’t push. Rachel’s contacts with her family were odd to say the least and even if Chloe’s mother didn’t have all the facts, she understood how hard it was for the young girl. So young, and yet so alone, only relying on her daughter’s devotion.

The most famous waitress of “The Two Whales” cleared her throat with another sip of juice, thinking of how to start the talk she really hadn’t expected to ever experience.

“When Chloe was a little girl she loved to play outside. This place was her heaven. You couldn’t keep her in the house, even if it was pouring.” Joyce smiled at her memories, enchanted in a few squares of the empty and forgotten garden.

“Max and she loved to play pirates.” Rachel added, more for the sake of proving she still could speak than actually adding anything insightful.

“It was way later. Max, as you know, was a frequent guest in the house, but I was referring to the times when Chloe was only a few years old. She was so adorable, always planning a new mischief or trick, ready for new trouble or an adventure. She always had such an imagination. Despite of William’s efforts she always found a way to get her clothes dirty. She had this one favorite shirt with a drawing of a little butterfly on it, and seriously she didn’t want to wear anything else. We ended up buying her another, and then yet another one, ending up getting even more, with exactly the same design, because she was ripping them apart almost in the same moment she was getting a new one. She was crying, begging and demanding, even if we all knew very well she would destroy the next one even faster. William was laughing when I grew impatient and yelled at Chloe one day: ‘how many butterfly t-shirts do you need, honey? Can we change the theme at least once?’ I had to throw out so many of them that I stopped counting… And then she got all shy and serious, imagine her, a 4-year-old, serious! She promised me she wouldn’t demolish her current one, she would be careful, since she didn’t want any butterfly being trapped in a trash can. Can you imagine? And she kept her word. I still have the last shirt somewhere, as good as new. She’s always been careless, until somebody asked her not to.”

Rachel listened in awe, almost forgetting how much she wanted Chloe to be at her side a moment ago. She could listen to those stories the whole night and it would never be enough. Secretly she was melting inside, imagining little adventurous Chloe with her favorite butterfly shirt running around the garden.

Joyce sighed deeply and looked at Rachel finally.

“So, do you really want to get back to school?” She asked directly, no involving any butterfly t-shirts
this time. Usually she was far from being straightforward, but Rachel could tell it was very important to her. This decision, not even a plan yet, gave Chloe’s mother a lot of hope.

“Yeah, I asked Chloe to graduate with me. She likes the idea. I guess.” The going-back-to-school thing went easier than she thought. Maybe Chloe was thinking about getting her diploma before, or she was just tempted by the passionate bribe Rachel prepared for her. Those details couldn’t be shared with Joyce though.

“How did you do that kid? I tried everything in my power and failed.” Chloe’s mother was more tired than curious. She still didn’t believe the news, but knew how much her daughter was attached to... well let’s say, her friend, for now.

Rachel hesitated between a stupid joke or a playful one, but then gave up and decided to tell the truth. You only live once, Amber. You are part of this household anyway. They won’t kick you out, at least not tonight.

“I just told her we have to think about the future.” She confessed shyly, wanting to say more, but it wasn’t an easy subject to elaborate about. The concept of the future was complicated on so many levels right now. She wanted to say OUR future, but the coward inside of her vetoed that option out.

Joyce looked at her. Her gaze was piercing, getting slowly to the bottom of Rachel’s soul, trying to uncover any possible hidden intentions, but there were none. It was scary but relieving at the same time. The moment of silence intensified, built up and compounded.

“You’re really serious about it.” It wasn’t a question, but Rachel felt the need to respond. The statement was also very ambiguous. Joyce could mean the school or her daughter, both issues important, both fit the description and the answer would be exactly the same.

“Yes, I am, Joyce.” That was easy. Not.

Chloe’s mom reached for a cigarette she had hidden in her apron’s pocket. She rarely smoked though, usually only in distress or moments of wonder. Rachel offered her lighter and her help was accepted. Was she really having this conversation? Was it really happening? How far had they gone, from stupid, naive kids in love to that kind of stuff?

“Do you think she will graduate?” The school issue was apparently more intriguing. Rachel relaxed a little bit.

“I truly hope so. She is very… ehm… dedicated.” Damn, she bit her tongue. Another double meaning hidden in one same sentence. Chloe, where the fuck did you go?

“I’ve noticed.” Judging by the tone of Joyce’s voice there was no room for interpretation left this time. Rachel felt her cheeks burning and her hands sweating. She never imagined herself being put in that kind of situation.

“You are full of surprises, Rachel. You’ve always been a sweet girl, but also a true hell raiser. I remember you both when you were just sixteen…” Joyce was dangerously reading her mind. “A couple of troublemakers, always up to no good. But you changed a lot. You and Chloe…” Her southern accent sounded so soothing right now, so smooth and reassuring. “I know how close you both are…”

Another space left for Rachel to fill in. Like she had any choice.

“We really are.” It was hard to deny the facts, but she really didn’t want to elaborate. It wasn’t enough of course. Not this time.
Joyce was waiting and smoking, her face was tensed and serious. She didn’t have to ask for more nor rush the young girl. She just created the need for an answer, an atmosphere for explanation. Rachel took a very deep breath, and then another one, just to be sure she wouldn’t die mid-sentence.

“I love her very much…” That was all she could produce before her voice cracked and she went silent, not sure if she succeeded or failed terribly.

Joyce relaxed very slowly, nodding to herself, and then threw out the empty, burnt out smoke into the uncut grass and did something completely unexpected. She walked to the girl and hugged her tightly. It almost broke Rachel’s heart, but in a shockingly good way. She felt something she didn’t experienced for years. A mother’s love.

“I know.” Joyce said, holding Rachel in her arms and rocking gently. “I know you do, kid.”

The embrace ended as fast as it happened. Before Rachel was able to say anything, to prepare a speech of how grateful she was and how much she would try to be a better person and help Chloe, Joyce was by the back door, slowly disappearing inside.

“One more thing, Rachel. Keep the funny business to acceptable limits, alright?” She heard Joyce’s voice from the inside, this time very motherly and reprimanding.

“I will, Joyce. We… will try.”

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Chloe wanted to bark and bite while David got out of his beloved muscle car and opened the hood. She should’ve known this piece of junk wouldn’t be able to start. The engine had been coughing wryly for quite a while and decided to give up finally. She had fucking told him, she warned him, but no! Because of his stubbornness the whole situation became even more awkward.

“That will take like 10 minutes tops.” The moustache looked around the garage, turning on the light and grabbing his tool box. Knowing him it would be at least a half an hour.

“It’s ok, David, I can wait. No worries. Thank you for your help though!” Max responded politely, still standing close to the entrance door, like she indeed was considering staying overnight as a backup plan. Technically, Chloe wouldn’t mind. Practically, she couldn’t wait to get back into Rachel’s arms. Logically, she was torn as hell and didn’t know what to do.

“Do you need any help?” She looked at David with pity. Her voice, still hoarse after all those chokes on cherry pie didn’t sound pleasant, even if this time she really tried to be nice to him.

She wasn’t needed anyway. The contact between David and the earth was already lost. As a typical gearhead, he stopped responding to any signal not remotely associated with auto repair. He grunted impatiently, completely focusing on the blood and guts of his car.

Chloe turned to Max, raising her hands in a helpless gesture.

“Sorry, Max, for the shit. We will be back up and running soon enough. I hope you didn’t have any crazy party planned at the hotel.” She joked, but her friend’s witty smirk put her off her stroke.

“It’s ok.” Max zipped up her hoodie and scratched her arm. “I can wait.”

“Would you mind a short fancy walk around this shitty neighborhood?” The blue-haired girl decided
to look for another cigarette. A smoke after a good meal tasted as good as after a good sex. “I will show you how nothing has changed and stuff.”

“Why the hell not.” Her friend agreed and they both started to walk down the road. The dark and breezy night reminded them of those good old times when they were wandering around, talking about everything, dreaming and cracking jokes; when life never tasted bittersweet and the worst imaginable scenario was an argument with your impatient mother.

“I really hope you didn’t mind me surprising you... all of you, like that.” Max still felt a little bit uncomfortable. The dinner didn’t go as smoothly as she expected. Her presence felt inappropriate, even if Max was always welcomed there without a hesitation like a family member, not just as a guest. She felt a little bit guilty and uneasy, which was shown in the way she was walking right now. Her steps seemed tense and uneven.

“It was a hella surprise, but a good one. Sorry If I acted like an asshole.” Chloe also sensed the distance between them. It was somehow familiar; it reminded her of a certain situation, when they had forgot about a lot of promises; failing to remember who they were and how they felt.

Both girls had not been in touch for years, but sensing the mood of a person you had known your whole life wasn’t that complicated. They knew whose presence made the late dinner more uncomfortable, and the evening more difficult. Max wouldn’t dare to bring it up just yet, Chloe wouldn’t even think about that possibility.

“I’m glad you and Rachel… came to terms with everything.” The tiny girl muttered, as her moving feet were her center of attention. She missed her blue-haired friend, but it was still odd just to hang out as if nothing ever happened.

“We did.” Chloe nodded “Things… look hella better now.” Every time she was talking to Max the word ‘hella’ escaped her mouth way too often. Was it a subconscious reminder of the fact she was indeed Rachel’s? Was it an invisible verbal leash?

“I’m glad to hear it.” Max put her hands in her jacket’s pockets. “You two are really meant for each other. I can tell.”

“Thanks. And yeah, we are. She’s fucking stuck with me. No other option.”

“Chloe…” Max stopped suddenly and looked at the other girl, and then started to talk fast yet calmly, almost whispering, lurking on David from time to time.

“I just wanted to talk about… what happened. Those few months ago when I came to visit and you were confused and...”

“You meant the morning make out session? Can’t blame you, I’m the best fucking kisser on the west coast.”

“Yeah, you can call it that. Whatever… Save it for Rachel, Chloe. I just wanted to clear it up, like for real. I’m coming back and I don’t really want any stupid unfinished business between us.”

“It’s cool Maximus Prime. I dig it. You have your life and your girl, I have mine. It happened, we had some fun, let’s just forget about it ok?” Chloe tried to sound joyfully unconcerned, but in fact she just didn’t know what to say. She was experiencing it for the first time, and hopefully the last. She knew Max was right and they had to leave this shit, but felt hopeless and taken off guard.

“I told Steph about it. She wasn’t angry. She might just look at you a little different now.” Max was constantly checking if David was able to hear them.

“That sounded so fucking dirty, Max!” Chloe’s laugh echoed on the empty street. “Wait, did you say

“The same and only.” Max sounded a little bit more confident right now, proud even. “She told me you knew each other, when you were still attending. She had some interesting stuff to say about Rach too.”

“I bet she had.” Chloe shook her head. “Small fucking world. It sounds like a fucking gay drama cliché. Everybody knows each other.”

“Arcadia Bay is a small town after all.”

“Too fucking small.” Stating the facts was always a good strategy during long and odd conversations. Chloe learned from the best.

David yelled something and waved in their direction. His car got patched up finally, they could hear the engine working. Chloe rolled her eyes, hoping they wouldn’t have to stop somewhere for an emergency service. She suffocated the still burning cig butt under her shoe and waved back to her step-father, letting him know they had seen him. Men and their cars, so fucking stubborn. The girls turned around and started to walk back.

“I told Rachel too. You know, honesty and shit.” Chloe decided to return the favor. “She wasn’t super happy, but she couldn’t really negotiate.”

“Negotiate what exactly?” Max blinked. Her friend could tell she got a little bit scared. Rachel tended to do that to people.

“Our painful death I guess. Probably burning by fire, knowing my little dragon. But we are hella fine now. Like really.” Reassuring her friend that her relationship was almost perfect, seemed important to Chloe. She didn’t exaggerate—it was the most precious thing in her life, but felt odd explaining herself.

“We’ve all noticed tonight.” Max winked understandingly. Chloe growled aloud, lifting her head in a theatrical gesture. “Oh, stop being so shy.” Max scoffed at her, elbowing her lightly. “It was fucking funny, especially those little puppy eyes of yours. Your mom was probably wondering why the hell you had dessert before dinner.”

“I’m gonna kill you, Maximus. You’re fucking dead.” Chloe was truly grateful, that the darkness didn’t let anybody to see her blushing. Why was she embarrassed? She’s a grown up in a serious relationship, she’s allowed to eat a dessert before the dinner or after.

Max stopped suddenly. First it was just a stumble, then she slowed down and finally bent down, tilting her head and covering her nose with both of her palms. She groaned once, then again, and sobbed a little. Chloe frowned, then ran to her friend, trying to help.

“Are you ok? Do you need some help?” She gripped her shoulders, trying to protect Max from falling.

“I’m fine... Just another nose bleed... It’s no biggie.” The small girl was trying anything to hold on and Chloe was the only option to keep her in a standing position. She desperately leaned on her friend, trying not to faint in the middle of the street.

“A nose bleed? Fuck me, girl! You are pale as hell!” The taller girl put her arms around her friend. Max was barely standing, her whole world was spinning, her knees shaking. The red drops of blood appeared on the front of her grey hoodie.
“I will be fine, just help me to get to the car, ok?” she murmured heedlessly.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sleep over? My mother would take care of you...” Chloe could feel the whole weight of Max on her arm, while trying to drag the almost senseless girl to the car. David was watching them concerned, not moving his ass of course. It was for the best, but Chloe almost barked with frustration. Experienced veterans, why do you need them?

“Steph will take care of me.” The attack had passed and Max was straightening slowly. She panted heavily for a while, still rubbing her nose, wiping blood from her cheeks and lips.

“You fucking scared me, Max. You need a fucking doctor!” Chloe didn’t lose her grip on her friend’s arm.

“It happens sometimes. It’s just... too much stress lately.” Her friend wasn’t eager to explain, thinking only about getting to her own bed, her own girl and sleep it over. No one could blame her.

They finally got to the car. David jumped to them to help, almost carried Max to his precious Ford Mustang. Chloe felt the guilt building up inside. She really should be the driver for her tonight, but it was too late to change the decision.

“Just take care of yourself, ok?”

“It’s fine, really.” Max, finally sitting comfortably in the leather seat, was tapping on her phone a message after message, probably informing Steph of the situation. If she didn’t, Chloe would seriously call her friend’s girlfriend and demand the best care. Seeing Max in this state was heart-wrenching, but she couldn’t do much more than just watch her though the car window.

“Call me tomorrow?” She asked, almost begged.

“I will for sure.” Max sent her a weak smile, while David put his muscle beast in motion. Chloe tapped the metal door, as an equivalent of a goodbye hug. Her step-father didn’t say anything this time, usually scoffing every time she tried to even touch his previous drive.

Chloe was watching their ride, while they slowly got eaten by the darkness of the road, and then she waited another few minutes, not being able to brush off this weird, strange feeling that she had just witnessed something extraordinary, something out of this world.

She sighed, shrugged and got back inside.

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She found Rachel outside, standing alone by the backyard door. Chloe opened the damn thing, irritated by the squeaky noise and walked, almost ran to her girlfriend. She was relieved to be in her presence again, smell her perfumes, see herself in her eyes.

“Hey beautiful, are you here alone?” She joked, but Rachel wasn’t in the mood for it. It was concerning, but Chloe was used to changing humors and different reactions every minute. She fucking loved it, signed up for it, damn it.

“Can you hold me?” She heard a begging whisper. A trembling voice, filled with a shitload of emotions concerned Chloe even more. She obeyed of course, surrounding Rachel in a perfect and
safe embrace. She kissed her hair, damn she loved to do it, her forehead, and started to rock her gently. Rachel needed it painfully and gasped quietly feeling Chloe’s arms around.

“Uh... is everything ok?”

“Just hold me, Chloe.” She heard the muffled response. “Just fucking hold me.”

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It was nice to be in each other’s arms, at night, in bed between the sheets with the calming sounds of a buzzing radio. They deserved it, striving for the rest like this the whole day, the whole evening and half the night. Rachel didn’t say much and since she got back from the shower she just wanted to cuddle and feel Chloe close. Her girl didn’t mind, slowly stroking her hair while feeling the sweet weight of Rachel’s head on her chest.

They could silently fall asleep at any moment, and Chloe counted on it, tired after the whole day, but when she closed her eyes, Rachel decided to talk. Always at the last moment.

“How did the talk with Max go?”

“It was ok, I guess. Her girlfriend is already enlisted at Blackwell so she has a hidden agenda for attending this particular school. Now she can be all gay in their dorm room.”

“Her girlfriend is a Blackwell student?” Oh, famous Rachel’s curiosity just woke up. Now she will start grilling her for every single detail.

“Uh-huh. The same student you were torturing for some sweet info about me years ago…”

“No shit, Steph Gingrich? That’s a score.” Rachel couldn’t help but smile. It felt nice just to lay down and feel her warmth, being safe, being protected.

“Yep. Steph is a great girl, so Max couldn’t score better. She will be held on a short leash though, no wild college life for her.”

“Your leash is shorter.”

“What can I say? I like to be pulled from time to time.”

If that was an invitation to another sexual innuendo, Rachel completely ignored it. It was uncommon, since she usually didn’t give up a single occasion to tease or provoke. It was a long day though and they were both tired.

“I talked to your mom.” A random confession alerted Chloe enough to lift her head.

“Oh yeah? What’s her deal this time?”

“She’s excited about school obviously and a little bit less excited about us, but…” Rachel was stroking Chloe’s chest and neck with the most tender gestures of her fingertips. It was unintentional. She just wanted to be tender, she needed to be.

“Wait, what?” The piercing blue eyes opened widely in sudden realization.

“I fucking told your mom that…” Rachel sighed knowing that Chloe would start reacting impulsively, moving around or possibly even jump out of the bed. Her comfortable and very desired
position was in extreme danger. Why couldn’t she just fall in love with somebody who would lay still while listening to her?

“That we are extremely gay together?” Of course, another joke. How was it even possible? Why the hell did Chloe always have to joke about everything? Rachel knew why, but it was definitely annoying, especially right now.

“Stop with this gay thing for fuck’s sake! I told her that I love you.” She hissed, not really angry, but still needed a calm hug more than an exciting thrill.

“Really?” Chloe’s heart jumped. She wasn’t sure if it was a sign of a heart attack or not, but it woke her up for good.

“Really. I seriously almost shit my pants.” Rachel heard her girl’s heart pounding and cuddled to her closer, hiding from everything, from every cold and problem she could think about.

“Of fuck, wow... Rach... Did my mom get scary? Or give you shit?”

“No, she was very nice and understanding, I guess. She just asked us not to fuck on the dinner table before breakfast because she feels uncomfortable frying the beacon and stuff.” Rachel really wanted this conversation to end, so she yawned purposely, still trying to bury her face somewhere between Chloe’s chest, her pillow, her neck or wherever else she would be safe from that piercing blue gaze.

Her girl didn’t respond at first, preferring to just hold her instead. Good, great job Chloe Price. Please keep it going, thank you, sincerely, yours always.

“No, but close enough. And stop grinning like an idiot. It’s not funny.” Rachel didn’t have to look at her, she knew this beautiful impulsive butterfly too well.

“I can’t fucking believe it, Rach. Did you really have to come out to everybody the same evening?”

“I didn’t really have a choice.” Chloe could feel a simple shrug against her chest.

“All right, I had a choice, I could lie, but I didn’t want to. Happy?” Sudden and aggressive movements around Chloe suggested that Rachel started to get annoyed.

“Fuck yes I am.” Her girlfriend stated proudly.

“Did that really make you happy?”

“You have no idea.” Still proud as fuck.

“Why?” Rachel finally lifted her head, leaning her chin on Chloe’s chest to look at her. “She knew we were together anyway. You weren’t really hiding anything before, me neither. You kiss me every single day, we hold hands... No to mention you had this ‘I just got laid’ grin on your face tonight. They had known for months if not for years.”

Chloe, still very pleased and more than grateful for her own existence, didn’t comment on Rachel’s style this evening. It was more of an ‘I just got fucked so hard on top of a truck that I forgot how to zip my pants’ look, but why bring it up today. She can always joke about it for the whole eternity.
“Because it’s one thing when you tell me you love me, and it’s hella different when you tell it to somebody else, like my mom. It means that you are really serious.” She answered plainly.

“Breaking news, Chloe.” Her girlfriend’s head was back on her chest. Nice feeling. “Yes, I am. But it’s literally impossible to prove it to you. I’ve said that a million times and you are still: ‘Oh really? Are you sure?’ Now you have to fucking graduate, Price. I didn’t go through this shit today for you to drop out again. A year from now you will be fucking stressed over your SAT and…” She dragged the blanket over her head trying to hide even more.

“Hey, are you crying?”

“No, I’m not.” Rachel’s muffled voice was breaking, her breath sharpened.

“Can I cry with you?”

“Shut up.”

“Rachel…”

Silence was the only answer left in the darkness. The blanket smelled like jasmine.

“Sunshine…”

Silence deepened and changed its tune a little bit.

“Did you just call me Sunshine? What kind of tacky songs did you start listening to?” The blanket moved viciously. Once.

“It happens sometimes.” Chloe’s voice was dangerously soft. So soft it could destroy every single string of confidence in Rachel Amber. She felt more helpless and unarmed than ever before. She didn’t know why her only reaction was to be so baffled in anger. And those stupid salty things dripping from her eyes, tears or something, she’s not crying though. Not fucking again.

“Well, I don’t recall…” She hesitated, really trying to find a perfect witty answer, but couldn’t find anything fitting. Anything at all.

“Usually when I watch you sleep…” Chloe smiled, slipping her hand below the blanket and kept stroking Rachel’s hair, to the rhythm of her own words. “Sometimes I wake up in the early morning or very late at night just to look at you. I can kiss you the way you never see me kissing you, when I’m up. I can play with your hair, trace the line of your eyebrows, stroke your perfect lips, listen to your sleepy breath…”

“Stop.” It was too much.

“You don’t want me to stop.”

“Yeah… I want you to, dork.” Rachel was sobbing quietly again. This whispered conversation was leading into a very dangerous direction. A direction that scared her more and more every second.

“Shut up, sunshine and just let me love you, ok? You deserve the best kind of love and I’m willing to provide.” Chloe was stripping her away mentally with every single word.

“Chloe… Please… Do you know what are you doing to me right now?”

“I know very well.”
“Oh yeah?” Rachel being shy was the best thing on earth.

“Removing your shield, unarming you.”

“Why? It’s all I got left.”

Rachel choked on her tears hard, desperately trying to hide her pure self, keeping it hidden like she had done for years. It was the rawest moment of her life, the most naked, most helpless and most touching. She had kept her guard up on for almost 4 years now, letting Chloe to get close, but never allowing herself to deconstruct into scraps and pieces.

“Because I want the real you. I’ve always wanted the real you.”

The typical ‘fuck off’ just didn’t work its way out from her tightened throat and trembling lips. Why couldn’t Chloe just shut up and fall asleep like a normal person? Or even make out like a normal girl in love, like teenage coups do? Why did Chloe have to love her so much?

“You have the real me.” She whispered instead, still hiding her face between the sheets and Chloe’s arms.

“I know, sunshine. I know. I got you.”

“Chloe?” The blond head appeared again, the hazel eyes were looking directly at her.

“Yeah?”

“One day, when we... graduate and stuff and… move out or something…”

“Yeah?”

“I’m gonna fucking marry you.” Then she hid again between the sheets. “You’re super fucked.”
You Start, You Finish

The dawn of the morning woke Chloe up with a beeping sound of incoming text messages and an empty left side of the bed. She stretched, yawning and scratching her head looking around for Rachel, but then heard a muffled noise of the shower running, so her disquiet finally faded away. She laid back on her pillows and grabbed the phone, scrolling through Max’s texts, reading them with half open eyes, not perfectly sure if she should be up or could save this activity for way later. Like noon.

Max sent her a bunch of reassuring messages, about how great she’s feeling now, no nose bleeds, then an icon of a pirate ship, a sweet thank you, and a cute selfie with Steph taken obviously a moment ago. Chloe giggled, noticing how displeased Max’s girlfriend was standing in front of a camera just after she woke up, but that’s the life with Caulfield for you. Suffer Steph, suffer.

They both looked genuinely in love though, despite the morning grumbling, an early wake up or an obvious lack of a hair brush. Good. Chloe was really crossing fingers for Max and this relationship.

To be honest she was a little bit of nervous around her friend last evening. Beyond nervous to be exact. She tried to blame the reconciling with Rachel that had happened just before they rushed to the dinner, but it wasn’t true. Not that she didn’t want Max in the picture, but everything was so complicated right now. Trying to rebuild things with Rachel was wrenching and uneasy, and adding another relation to focus on was a little bit too much for Chloe Price. It seemed that way at least.

She put her phone away and wiped out the rest of her sleep from her eyelids. The lazy morning light woke up a positive thought. Maybe it was for the best. Chloe could really use some advice and company from somebody not attached to this household and who was able to be just a little bit objective. Maybe it was a nice gift from the merciful universe, who knows.

The door opened rapidly and Rachel walked in, wrapped only in her pink towel. It was barely covering much, but Chloe’s parents were busy with morning preparations and usually didn’t go upstairs that early. They preferred to yell, if needed. Chloe was very grateful for it; she recently grew in her gratefulness a lot, now undressing her girlfriend with her hungry eyes. Waking up early had some pros for sure.

Rachel noticed the tension of course, but sat on the edge of the bed casually, trying to comb her wet and tangled hair.

“Any plans for today?” She asked, pretending to ignore the devilish grin on Chloe’s lips.

“I do have plans, actually.” Her girlfriend tossed her blanket away and started to crawl in her direction with very obvious intentions. Yesterday changed the dynamic between them a lot, the tension growing visibly. They teased each other less, knowing where it would lead them, despite of the time and place.

“Really?” Rachel narrowed her eyes, tilting her head and purred softly. She smiled, feeling Chloe’s kisses on her bare shoulders.

“Yeah.” Kissing was their favorite activity, even it was a slippery slope usually leading to something more. “I wanted to check out Blackwell, see what’s up, get the application papers and how much it will cost us.” She added nonchalantly, like it was well-planned weeks ago. She indeed spent some time last night debating the school issue silently, but since the decision was already made and even announced, why not go with it.
“All right, sounds like a great idea.” Rachel nodded, and then looked at her wryly. “Who are you and what did you do to Chloe Price?”

“My girlfriend ate her last night.” Her lips brushed her neck, not leaving a single mark on the wet skin. It probably was supposed to be cute, but it was a spark to start a fire. Chloe Price, the arsonist; who would have thought?

“Dork. Except Blackwell?” Rachel coughed trying to hide her yearning for more than just a sweet morning kiss.

“I might have something in mind.” The response came in a captivating whisper.

“I just got back from the shower.” Rachel moaned softly, then took a deep breath. Somebody decided to seduce her this morning and she was more than willing to let it happen. The roles switched so easily sometimes.

“It’s even better. You smell nice.” Chloe nipped the top of her ear, brushing off the wet hair to have better access to a new potential exploration area.

“So, I usually don’t smell nice to you?” Rachel felt a shiver hitting her suddenly, and moaned again, dumbfounded at how fast she was giving up the game.

Chloe wasn’t listening nor answering at this point. She pulled the towel with a single strong gesture, leaving her girl naked, and then dragged her back to bed covering her with herself. The sheets were still warm from the night’s sleep, but got heated even more, burning down Rachel’s skin. She felt Chloe’s lips and tongue on her neck, shoulders, breasts, going lower and lower. She gasped, then whimpered lightly pulling her closer, as the blue temptation was in between her thighs teasing, kissing and stroking. Rachel forgot how to feel anything else. She forgot to think again, losing herself for her again.

And then she made a huge mistake.

Forgetting the time and place, she moaned so loudly, almost screamed with pure pornographic expression, with all her pleasure and need.

It was really, really loud. Louder than she expected.

“Girls!” Joyce yelled from downstairs, with a clear warning.

Panic would be a mild word to describe the wave of terror in Chloe’s blue eyes. She put her hand on Rachel’s mouth immediately, while her internal screaming was almost as loud as her girlfriend’s previous utterance. She moved up quickly, covering both of them with the blankets, alert and awake. Her breath was still fast and her blood was boiling, but she really didn’t want to risk her mother’s visit in the room. Not that she really expected Joyce to walk in, but it was the only physical way she could cover her bashfulness.

Chloe didn’t remember if they had locked the door. No, they didn’t… Rachel had just come back from the shower. Oh..

“… For fuck’s sake. How am I supposed to start the day now?”

“We will finish later.” Chloe watched the door anxiously, trying to cover them with everything she had around. Blankets, sheets, pillows, she would build a fucking fort, just in case somebody might like to see how things were going here.
“I don’t give a shit about later.” Rachel hissed. She rarely acted like a spoiled brat, but couldn’t help it now. Being buried alive in their bed wasn’t a solution to calm her down. “You start, you finish.”

“You really want me to fuck you right now? My mother is downstairs. With ears. Listening.” Her agitation and fear would be adorable if the sparks weren’t still flying.

“She’s always downstairs, we live in her house.” Rachel knew, it was stupid to demand more. She wasn’t an idiot, on the contrary. But when it came to Chloe she tended to literally lose her mind.

Her girlfriend’s heart was racing, trying to win a fucking Arcadia Bay derby, for more than one reason though. Chloe was trying to think of a way out, desperately searching for a way to kill two birds with one stone, but was torn between putting her mother in a very uncomfortable situation and leaving her girlfriend unsatisfied. That would be also a nice summary of her recent life in general.

“Can you promise you not will be... umm... not loud at least?”

“No.”

“So, either I have to gag you with a pillow or you will have to wait. I don’t want to be homeless and you don’t want to be relocated to the couch.” Chloe felt terrible breaking the news to her, but she didn’t have any other choice. It felt pathetic and fuck, she would experience the consequences later, one way or another.

“Fine, I will finish myself, and you take a shower.” Rachel rolled her eyes. Yes, she was provoking, but you can’t blame a girl for trying to work her way out.

“No fucking way!” Her girlfriend couldn’t react any differently.

They started to fight and wrestle between the sheets again. First it was just a stupid struggle to release some steam, then it became more and more sweet, especially when every single touch and poke felt electrified.

The blonde lost this fight.

“Here you have your coming out shit. Now you can’t really fuck me in your own fucking bed.” Rachel was really angry, way more furious than she thought she would be. She had been waiting for months to get back on track and when it finally happened it seemed like everything was acting against her wishes and needs. Her whole body was aching, longing to feel Chloe again, and it was fucking disappointing not to act on it.

“I can, but I would really have to fucking gag you.” Her girl was panting softly, Chloe still holding Rachel’s hands above her head in a tight grasp. She blew out a single blue lock from her face and grinned more than content, being on top of her and in full control.

Rachel contemplated this though for a moment, then licked her lips. Seductively.

“You are not helping.” Chloe warned.

“Who said I want to?”

Chloe growled and lost any kind of reasonable control over her actions, kissing deeply, biting her neck... One of her hands was reaching lower again, too fucking slow, too perfect, and when she finally got to the destination, Rachel really had to bite her lip hard not to alarm the whole house again. She closed her eyes, pulling Chloe closer and bit her shoulder as hard as she wanted to scream.
It hurt, it would leave a mark. Chloe didn’t mind. She didn’t really notice. She was paying attention to only one single thing, one spot. A shiver went through her spine, when she could touch it again. Feeling how ready Rachel was and how turned on, Chloe choked on her own moan. She couldn’t even shut herself up with a long kiss, since her beautiful girl was still biting her arm through the Blade Runner shit and it didn’t seem that she would stop anytime soon.

“We really have to go.” Chloe murmured breathlessly, knowing it was a big fucking lie. They wouldn’t leave this room until this was done. This or the breakfast would be a very different and interesting experience, especially for her poor mother.

The rapid movements of Rachel’s hips were clearly showing how impatient she was, and any delay wouldn’t be accepted. Chloe buried her face in her girlfriend’s neck and obeyed the orders eagerly. She wanted her, wanted so much, but really tried to do the right thing today. She wanted to be responsible, and oh fuck her, there it went, damn it. It was so not fair.

Rachel muffled something indistinctively feeling how Chloe’s hand slowed down and started to tease. Her fingers, tangled in blue hair, pulled a few of the locks, showing how fast her desperation was growing. It was adorable and hot at the same time.

“What?” Chloe whispered to her ear. “Too slow?” She felt a feverish nod by her shoulder. Rachel bit her harder, almost howling in desire. “You don’t want me to stop?” This time the nod was way more furious and desperate. There was a price to pay for the complains and demands. Chloe’s hand froze in place. “Look at me.” She asked softly. Her girlfriend bucked her hips with a silent plea, but didn’t want to stop biting her arm. Where did it come from, what the fuck was she doing? “I said look at me.” Chloe repeated, requesting firmly, and this time her wish was granted. Rachel’s eyes could kill. Literally. But, oh fuck, that was a view she could die for. “Say my name.” Chloe decided she wanted to go down in flames. Why not? She had been waiting for a morning like this for months. Dying seemed like a reasonable price.

Rachel wanted to strangle her and was dangerously close to do so. She really didn’t want to wait any longer, feeling that she was seconds away from fulfillment, but seeing how dominant her girlfriend randomly became turned her on even more.

With the last scraps of control, she brushed the blue hair surprisingly gently.

“Chloe…” She whispered, with her eyes glowing with a pure, raw desire. “Please…”

And that was it. If her girlfriend planned to continue playing this game, she gave up in this very moment. Who wouldn’t? She started to move fast, silencing her with a long, deep kiss. Rachel responded with her whole being, losing every single angry thought she had developed in the meantime. The whole fucking world could disappear and she wouldn’t be able to let her go, let her stop again.

She was seconds away. It was the very best few seconds of her life, as far she could remember, but remembering required thinking, and Rachel wasn’t up to it. Chloe panicked a little bit, watching her girlfriend come. Oh damn, yes, God please… she wanted to see it for the rest of her life, and then tried to silence her with a kiss, to shut her up with a deep kiss, then with a mad one. Now she was panicking again, just simply using her other hand to gag Rachel for a good minute.

She got bitten. For real. Suffer, Price, Suffer.

“Fuck…” That was all Rachel could say and even this was almost too much, while the world was still spinning.
“We just did. Want another round?” Chloe could barely speak too. Her blue eyes were sparkling a little bit. She was willing to spend the whole day in bed and assumed that Rachel really wouldn’t mind changing the plans.

Chloe’s sight became less blurry, so she could finally look at her girlfriend.

The killer’s gaze made a huge comeback. Rachel’s breath was still uneven and rough, her hands were shaking when she brushed off the hair from her sweaty forehead. She had just taken a shower, damn it. She should take another one, but that would be way more suspicious for Chloe’s parents than just pretending nothing had happened.

She wouldn’t mind another round indeed.

“Fuck…” Rachel repeated, still in the fever. She missed those mornings. She had been imagining how it would be to get back to their routine, but she had never experienced nor expected anything like it.

The very first time she woke up in this bed, between the same sheets, Chloe also wasn’t able to control her morning boner. They giggled a lot, playing around, teasing, still shy to each other and finally found themselves somewhere in the clumsy desire and pure fear that somebody would come in and see them together. Rachel smiled weakly remembering how happy she was then. She was way happier now.

“Later.” She heard Chloe’s whisper. “I promise.”

Any idea of getting up seemed extremely foreign to both of them at this moment. Later seemed too far away.

“When I asked if we are back on track…” Rachel was still panting heavily. “I didn’t know you had spent the last two months planning on how to tame me.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Chloe Price was too fond of herself right now. Way too fond. Then she kissed the top of her nose and jumped off the bed. “Get up. We don’t have much time.”

“Wait… what?” Rachel wasn’t very keen on lifting her head, not to mention her whole body.

“My mom is waiting with breakfast.” Chloe fastened her belt and started to look for a bra. She threw Rachel her own clothes, whatever she could find around. “Even if we decide to sneak out fast and avoid eating, it would be nice to say fucking hi.” She dropped on the mattress, and kissed her fast, while adjusting her t-shirt.

“Hurry up girls, I don’t have all day!” They heard Joyce’s loud voice downstairs. Just in time.

Rachel started to rush too, dressing up as fast as she could. This time she double checked if every button was still in its place. She wouldn’t be able to stand another of Joyce’s knowing looks. Then she froze in place, recalling why Chloe’s mother could not be pleased with them today anyway and she hid her face in her palms.

“I’m gonna fucking sneak out from the window today.” She groaned. “I can’t go down there now.”

“I told you to be hella quiet. Suffer Amber, suffer.” Chloe kissed her again, grabbed her hand, yanking her to the door. “C’mon sunshine, it won’t be that bad.”

It wasn’t that bad at all. Despite her previous warnings, Joyce was nice as always, not allowing an uncomfortable silence to take over. She was also almost late, so even if there was a question or a
reprimand in the air, she didn’t act on it. David was already gone; his watch had started way earlier today. Thank God for small favors.

Mornings were always busy.

Rachel relaxed pretty fast, especially after being served with eggs, bacon and waffles. Focused on her plate, she was eating slowly, contemplating every single bite. Chloe shoved the whole bowl of cereal into her mouth before her girlfriend took a fork in her hand, but this wasn’t unusual. If Chloe didn’t eat fast it meant she was not feeling well.

“Chloe, there is a mail delivery today, please be home this afternoon. David ordered some parts for his car and asked for one of us to be here when it comes.” Joyce gracefully didn’t mention a thing, purposely focusing on everyday things. She knew these two couldn’t be separated, not after everything that had happened, and some things would happen less and more often, obviously. The ship had sailed on the wild ocean waters, and Joyce didn’t protest. She just hoped not to have an aural confirmation of their actions ever again. They were young and in love, no one could blame them, but it was a mother’s obligation to set the rules though, even if she decided not to make any consequences.

“Sure, mom.” Chloe didn’t even protest. It was such a nice change. A good influence, maybe? Joyce could wish. “Oh, do you know if the admission office is open during the summer? Or the principal’s office?”

“At Blackwell? I’m sure it is.” Chloe’s mother noticed very well how Rachel was astonishingly silent. She knew her breakfast could swipe everybody off their feet, but it was more than that. The girl was making all the effort to look innocent, but it was way too late for it. Joyce just hoped the school thing wasn’t brought up just as a mere distraction.

“Do you know when they close?” Chloe kept asking with a pure curiosity. Her mother almost believed her now. Almost.

“Probably three o’clock, as always. Do you want me to call David and ask?” Joyce finished her coffee and started to clean up the kitchen counter. Rachel got up immediately, offering her help as always. She was indeed a perfect girlfriend, and a very brave one. A little bit loud though. Too loud.

Joyce wished that she would be deaf this morning.

“Nah, we will go and check in person anyway.” Her daughter was entirely ignorant or played the role perfectly. The second option was more possible, since she didn’t complain how cold the sunny-side-up eggs were.

Joyce nodded and turned back to the kitchen counter, reaching for her purse and the phone. Rachel had already cleaned the mess, wretchedly avoiding any physical contact with her girlfriend’s mother. Joyce couldn’t help but smile. It wasn’t the end of the world after all.

“Do you girls need my help with this?” She asked, almost ready to go.

“Thank you, Joyce. I think we will manage.” Rachel didn’t lose her ability to speak, but her voice was shaking a little bit. Good. Joyce didn’t like to be fed with a fake confidence.

“Oh, I know you will.” She muttered, walking to the door and leaving them in the kitchen, dazed and flabbergasted. She had to say something, that was a mother’s obligation after all.
“Blackwell, here we come.” Chloe sighed, standing in front of the steps to the main building.

The school looked unwelcoming, abandoned and almost haunted in the middle of the summer. All the students were already enjoying the long vacation or simply tried to avoid this education center as much as possible. Who wants to be near school during summer break?

They couldn’t find a single soul around the dorms either. The quarters were closed, emptied and prepared for general renovation. Blackwell Academy, changing into both Blackwell High and Blackwell College of the Arts, requested a lot of changes and way more space for future students. That’s why Max had to book a hotel instead of staying with her girlfriend on the doomed grounds of Blackhell. Officially no one was allowed to have any guests overnight, but in reality, everybody did it.

“I’m hella proud of you.” Rachel kept holding her hand. “I’m proud of us.”

“Let’s see if there’s anything to be proud of.” Chloe looked at the main gate, feeling weird. It was hard to describe, like a mix of disappointment and excitement at the same time. Rachel was an extremely bad influence, damn it.

They walked up the stairs, opened the door and dove inside. Nothing had changed. Some posters looked new, some of them were missing. New graffiti replaced the old and faded ones. The sound of their steps on the marble flood of the hallway echoed around loudly.

The principal’s office was located close to the entrance, so they didn’t have to wander for long. Out of all the rooms and areas of Blackwell Academy, Chloe hated this one the most although there were some pleasant memories related to it.

Rachel thought about the same thing, smiling at her girlfriend.

“Ready?” She asked, knocking lightly.

Chloe wanted to say a lot of things. How much she hated this place, how lonely she had felt here, how much she had disappointed her mother and herself by being expelled and how she hated the idea of graduating high school, but she just nodded, emitting a weak smile. It was an accident, it had to be; she couldn’t be glad to be back, it was ridiculous.

“Ready.” She pushed the door and walked inside.

Mrs. McMullen, as old as Blackwell itself, the most genuine and adorable little lady, who was holding the receptionist position for decades didn’t even hide her surprising gaze. She adjusted her glasses to see better, still in disbelief and then clapped her hands with excitement.

“Look what the cat dragged in! I did not expect to see you ladies here anytime soon.”

“And we did not expect it either.” Chloe murmured, silenced immediately by Rachel’s elbow in her own ribs.

“How are you, Mrs. McMullen?” Her girlfriend had already switched to the role of the most adorable student on the planet. It had been months but she didn’t forget how to play this game, finding all the right words and gestures.
“I’m fine sweetheart, I’m fine.” The old lady had always had a weak spot for the young Amber girl. She was so sweet and polite—too bad she decided to drop out school. Such a waste.

“Is principal Wells in his office?” Chloe Price was also a memorable former student, but because of far different reasons.

“Yes, he is. Let me ask if he can meet you now.” She reached for the phone, but before she was able to make a call, the master of the academy, born in morning booze, the ruler of the dormitory realm and the leader of the education troops opened the door of his office and lurked outside, alerted by a sudden conversation. Chloe was sure he was bored as fuck, sitting there the whole time, when everybody else was having fun somewhere else.

“Good morning, principal Wells. Would you have a minute to talk to us about something?” Rachel was obviously determined to make things work.

“Please, come in!” He didn’t hesitate, opening the gate to his lair widely and letting them in.

“Fingers crossed!” Mrs. McMullen whispered just before they all disappeared inside.

The girls sat in front of his desk, like they had done years ago, getting their first, but not last reprimand from the principal. The atmosphere of hope, anxiousness and distress came back in full-force, even if they didn’t have anything to be afraid of—not yet anyway.

“Miss Amber and Miss Price.” Principal Wells crossed his hands on his chest, still not taking his seat. He liked to look at people from above, making everybody look smaller, weaker and helpless. “What a nice surprise. I didn’t expect to see you two in these walls in the nearest future.”

“We missed this place. Right, Chloe?” Rachel smiled sincerely, despite how much she was lying right now. It was for the greater good though.

“We’ve thought a lot about our future, and after hours of profound discussion, the decision has been made. We would really like to graduate. We did slip and misbehave, creating a huge turmoil for all the teachers and tutors, but forced by an unstoppable urge, we wished to talk to you as soon as possible, hoping to ask for another chance.”

Rachel Amber, the honor student, in her prime. Chloe was starting to wonder if a Shakespeare quote would appear in her speech as well, or maybe it already had? She really should say something, but it was hard to top her girlfriend’s well-crafted speech. Was she improvising or had she prepared the whole thing before?

“Interesting.” Wells’ eyebrows rose in bewilderment.

“Blackwell Academy has been and always will be our alma mater.” Rachel continued, with a pleasant smile glued to her face. Even if she felt uncomfortable, she was keeping her guard high. “And we can’t imagine graduating from any other school. It would be an amazing closure for our troubled teenage years.”

Wells grunted loudly, not sure how to react. Chloe was in a similar state of mind.

“You do understand it’s a private institution, and therefore every single student is required to cover their tuition costs.” The financial issues were always the first thing the principal was thinking about.
As always.

“We are aware, yes.” Rachel nodded, still smiling.

“Are you familiar with the possible cost of the application and the tuition for your final year?”

“It would be amazing, if you could tell us, Sir.” Chloe decided to show off that she wasn’t mute. She started to hate this idea with even more passion, but it was too late to just slam the door and leave this money-thirsty motherfucker behind. She really tried not to sound sarcastic, but secretly suspected she had failed again.

He scrawled a few numbers on a piece of yellow paper and passed the note to Rachel. She read it, and hid it in her jacket’s pocket, not even bothering to give Chloe a single look. It would be useless to frustrate her right now. It was better to discuss the financial issue afterwards, when she would be able to present more playful arguments and sweet up all the concerns with more than just an official talk.

“Thank you.” She said simply. “We will be able to manage something, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure your father, Miss Amber, will be able to cover for you.” Wells didn’t give up, not deceived by Rachel’s confidence. “He’s been always generous to this institution and the school board. I’m not sure about Miss Price though. She was expelled and therefore her scholarship has been cancelled. We can work on a re-installment, but…”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed a little bit. She didn’t lose her game, but the fact that he just offended Chloe in her face was beyond bothering. She recognized the familiar tone, something that reminded her of her own father and the contemptuous way he always spoke about her blue-haired girlfriend.

“Is there any chance she could count on a discount since her step-father is employed at this institution?” She asked slowly, reaching for Chloe’s hand instinctively. It was a simple gesture, but this time had a double meaning. She would take care of her girl, no matter what, and this asshole better get it.

The sad part was, Chloe was so used to be offended by assholes like Wells, she didn’t even pay attention. Yes, she was poor and any kind of financial distress was beyond her reach. She just took this as a sad, well-known fact.

“A discount, yes, but it won’t cover all the costs.” Wells shrugged, watching them closely. He didn’t have high hopes for Price anyway. Amber is an excellent student when she tries, but the other one…

“I will manage.” Chloe responded suddenly. It surprised Wells so much, he reached for one of the glasses standing on his desk. All of them were empty, so he pulled back, embarrassed a little bit.

Rachel squeezed her hand. The principal sighed deeply. He had a lot of questions to ask, but shied away from them, not being sure if this was really a good time and place. The application process would take some time and he would be able to question them later. He remembered the concerning rumors about these two and illegal substances’ possession, money laundering business or a bunch of crooked individuals they kept company with, but there was enough time to check their criminal background afterwards. He didn’t strive for trouble, but James Amber was a powerful man and no one could simply refuse his wishes or his daughter’s, even if she decided to drag Chloe Price with her along the way.

“I’m happy to hear it, Miss Price.” He pretended to wonder for a moment, judging their possible chances. They knew it was an act, he knew it too. Money speaks. “Well I have to say that your visit
here was unexpected but also very gratifying. I’m really glad you both changed your minds about your future and decided to pursue the right path in getting the necessary knowledge and experience for success in life. Despite my huge previous disappointment of your actions, I’m willing to give you both another chance and enlist you both to Blackwell Academy for the senior year. After the cost of application and tuition will be covered, of course.”

“Of course.” Rachel hated her polite smile.

“Would you prefer me to contact your father and discuss the details with him?” He opened his notebook, ready to make a call right there and now.

“I would prefer to talk to him myself. It’s supposed to be a surprise.” She shook her head shyly. Let him think she is a good daddy’s girl, it always worked.

“All right. Is there anything else you would like to discuss? Would you prefer to also stay in the dorms or live outside the campus? As far as I remember you were previously staying in one of the rooms provided by our facility, Miss Amber. “

That was a provocation, Rachel could tell. He wanted to separate them, pushing his rules and authority against them, but not today or never. It was time for Chloe to squeeze her hand.

“We both prefer to stay outside of campus, if possible.” The blue-haired trouble stated with a wry smile. Being respectful didn’t come easily and she was always dancing on the edge of an insult or blunt confession.

“All right then. Please remember that the first week of August is the final one for applying. Don’t delay in such an important case.” He finally got up and shook their hands. Rachel awarded him with yet another charming smirk. Chloe didn’t remember if she had ever really shaken his hand before. Probably not.

They left quickly, thanking Mrs. McMullen for the support, striving for a gasp of a fresh air. Rachel didn’t even realize her girlfriend was still holding her hand like she had done for most of the meeting. The acting thing was more exhausting than usual, more draining than ever before. She didn’t have to pretend anything for a long while now and it was hard to get back on this horse.

When the Blackwell gate closed behind them, Chloe grabbed her waist, dragged firmly and kissed. She woke up in a very dominant mood today and damn, Rachel didn’t mind. She felt her fingers on her thigh, moving up to her belt and then reaching for her jacket’s pocket. And then dragging something from it fast.

“Hey! You fucking thief!” Rachel broke the kiss.

“You like the criminal side of me.” Chloe joked, unwrapping the crumbled paper with Wells’ handwriting on it. She looked at the numbers and stopped, frozen in place. Her mood changed immediately, darkened and sorrowed. “Five thousand dollars a year? Rach, it’s fucking impossible for me. Literally. I can’t ask my mom for that kind of money. I know she would do everything to give it to me, but I just can’t…”

“Shut up. I got you covered.” She felt Rachel’s arm around her shoulders.

“How? Do you have a secret stash of cash you forgot to tell me about?”

“I have an idea.” Rachel winked.

“Don’t even…” There was only one person in Arcadia Bay who was able to lend them that kind of
money. One person, who was dedicated to Rachel enough, he wouldn’t even care for them paying him back. Chloe straightened slowly, clenching her fingers into fists. Angry, disappointed, or just sad. She wasn’t sure what she was feeling, but the patched-up hole in her heart opened again.

“You don’t even.” Rachel shook her head very, very slowly and touched Chloe’s cheek. “If you meant Frank, I’m gonna fucking smack you.” She added softly, not even mad. Just sorrowful and guilty again.

“So how?” Chloe brushed off her hand a little bit too harsh. Every time she thought it wouldn’t get to her, that she had worked it out already, it came back and made her empty inside again.

“My father, of course.” Rachel tilted her head.

“Your father?” Her girlfriend frowned. “I’m sure he will be ecstatic to cover for me. He’s always been my biggest fan. Why not throw a hundred dollar bills in my direction?”

“You forgot about one thing, Price.”

“Like what?” The pain was back. The horror that shook her when she had learned about this fucking asshole hit her again. She barely could think or focus.

“Me.”

“I don’t really see the connection.” The helpless gesture showed even more how clueless Chloe could be, or how distracted. Rachel obviously had no idea what was on her girl’s mind right now, and fuck, that was a good thing.

The blonde kissed her hard and fast, afraid of another rejection, but before she stepped back, Chloe responded by pulling her close. Frank or not, she won’t let her go.

“Here’s your fucking connection.”

“I don’t get it.” Chloe trapped her in her arms, and then got illuminated. Finally. “You want to ask your father to pay my tuition? Are you crazy? Even if he agreed, I wouldn’t be able to accept it. I will never be able to pay him back, and he would hold onto it, and use it against me, against… us. No, Rach, no. I won’t do that.”

There were several things that would turn on Rachel Amber’s full rage. First and the most important one was saying “I won’t” after they had agreed on something. The second most popular one was “I don’t deserve it”. Chloe didn’t say it, but Rachel knew her too well. She wanted to strangle Wells for the things he had said to the blue-haired girl, she wanted to protect her and stand up for her, but first she had to face Chloe’s own lack of confidence.

“Listen to me, you dumbass. Yes, you will accept. Yes, you will graduate. You will graduate with me and from this school. And who knows, maybe even with flying colors. My father might not love you, like I do, and thank god for it, but there is one thing that would speak to him. Money.”

“He will make a shitload on my diploma.” Helpless would be the word to describe the look she gave Rachel. Sorry it didn’t work out, she felt not good enough again.

Alright, Rachel didn’t want to pull out the big guns just yet, but she didn’t have a choice.

“Your family’s paid and is still paying for everything I need. I’m grateful, I really am, and If Joyce won’t throw me out, I would like to stay in your bed and in your house as long as we won’t be able to find our own place. I wasn’t that fucking proud when… when you took care of me… and your
whole family was there for me and… for us. I know you are proud, Chloe and I love and respect you for it, but I know what I’m doing. My father… I know he feels guilty about the whole fucking thing and accepting any kind of cash from him would make him feel better. He understands the rules of the trade, he will pay up.”

“You really want to do this? I should be able to…” Chloe Price, liable edition, the provider of wealth and happiness, came back.

“You’re fucking adorable, but you’re not gonna get into any shady business to cover the expenses of your education. Or mine, because I know how suddenly responsible you became. Drop the ‘Chloe Price, the protector’ act. I got you. Not to mention you owe me one.”

“I do? For what?” It would be nice if Rachel would stop confusing her for a moment. Just for one tiny moment, like eternity.

“For the morning. Today.” Chloe, still sad and a little bit angry, blushed. It was a very cute and interesting compilation. Rachel promised herself not to use sexual encounters or memories as a tool or as an argument, but she was out of other options at the moment.

Plus, she fucking liked to tease.

“I didn’t expect your revenge to include your father and half of his bank account.” Chloe murmured softly. She hoped for a different one for sure, but the seductive joke didn’t really work. It was really worrying. Rachel hid her hands inside Chloe’s jacket, hugging her.

“Half? Not even close.” Her girlfriend kept forgetting that some people made more than thirty thousand a year. “Life is full of surprises, Chloe Price. Some of them kick your ass, some are actually nice.”

The mix of sexual tension, grief and sorrow, the old terrible memories, this family business and possible financial struggle had to explode at some point. Chloe sharply turned around and started to walk away, as fast as she could. She had hella practice in escaping uncomfortable situations, even with Rachel. And, all the promises she was keeping, all the responsibilities she had, all the problems and struggles, with Frank on top of the fucking pile, could seriously just burn down in a fucking fire.

Rachel ran after her. She had expected that something like that might happen, and had kept her guard up until this moment. She grabbed her hand, stopping her, with a silent plea in those hazel eyes. Chloe scoffed, retorted, tried to break free, but her girlfriend was stronger and her leash short. Trapped in her own confusion, the blue-haired mess turned back and hit the wall of the old academic building so hard she almost broke her wrist.

“I give up. I always have to give up, right Rachel? I don’t know how you do it, but I always have to look like a fucking idiot, trying and trying and you just have to have it your way.” No one told her that growing up would be that hard. That this amazing relationship would be that hard. “You start and you have to fucking finish. Always.”

“It’s called being consequent.” Rachel, still breathing fast, was slowly taking over her fury. It costed her much more than she predicted, and she was damn good with predicting Chloe Price. “It’s ok... I love you, baby. It’s fine.” The sudden difference in Chloe’s eyes, this abrupt sorrow and guilt was also disturbingly worrying. She wasn’t sure how it happened and why. She tried to comfort her girl, but what was the problem Chloe was running away from now?

“No, it’s not. Rach, don’t get me wrong. I know it’s for the better, I do. I just…”
Her girl trapped her in an embrace. Chloe tried to break free, again and again but Rachel had made her decision, she had made her hers and wouldn’t let her go, physically or in any other meaning. She just pulled her close, speaking softly, guessing, reassuring.

“You just don’t want to rely on others and work on it the hard way? You are not self-sufficient and independent anymore?”

“Yeah…” Well, good guess. This and Frank. He was still under her skin, still something that bothered her all the time. She knew this fight was stupid and unnecessary, but she fucking didn’t dare to tell the truth. Rachel was right though, Chloe felt dependent and she hated it.

“I rely on you. I’m not independent either. You know why? Because being in a fucking relationship means you have give up your fucking independence and let somebody take care of you sometimes. And I’m not gonna lie, I want to take care of you. I need this and I need you to let me.”

“Fuck you, Rachel.” It was childish.

Chloe was stripping Rachel emotionally for over two months now. She didn’t leave a single shield or armor, removing all the spikes and thorns. She did that on purpose, carefully and with love, but there was a price to pay. Rachel loved rebellious and riotous Chloe, but in a moment like this she really needed the vulnerable and raw one, the one hidden below.

She felt it was something else bothering her girl though. Something more important than her father or their financial abilities. She couldn’t guess what and didn’t know how to ask.

Life is an art of asking the right questions.

“You can fuck me later. Now, I want you to trust me.” She stroked her arm, caressing slowly.

Get a grip, Price, put yourself together. Everything was going so well; she was back, they were back. She would survive somehow, push it away, forget, let’s not create another horror or drama here. Calm the fuck down.

“I do trust you.” Chloe faced her again, not fighting with the embrace anymore. “I’m sorry.”

“I know, baby. I’m sorry too…” A kiss helped. “Hey, it’s ok… And now… Are you prepared to be a well-behaved student of the most famous academy in the whole county? Are you willing to get back to society and enlighten them with your intellect and the life skills you’ve learned in the meantime?”

“As ready as I can be.” She was slowly finding her solace in breathing Rachel’s smell, trying to forget about the horrid thoughts that had woken up in her mind.

“It will be fun, I promise.” The patient and loving voice was helping her to heal. “And this time I won’t fucking leave your side, so prepare for some nasty comments from all the fucking freshmen, especially when we make out on every single lunch break.”

Chloe rolled her eyes and laughed. They both knew the freshmen would have a hard year starting this fall.

“You were hella right, Rachel.” She smirked.

“About?”

“Life is full of surprises. I really can’t wait for this fucking school to start.”
It started to rain. Oregon summer was always famous for its gloomy weather. Most of the days till then had been mostly sunny, but the dark clouds came back again. It began with a small drizzle, and before they noticed, the sky was shaken by thunder, hitting one by one in a huge storm.

They both hid in Chloe’s room, in their room, as David was saying. They didn’t really complain, cuddling and watching the same movies over and over again. Chloe had some all-time favorites and liked to beat them to death, re-watching constantly. Rachel didn’t mind, finding it amazingly cute. Not to mention she liked them too, but damn, she would never admit it.

They made love, and then again, not worrying about pausing the movie or afraid of Chloe’s parents’ presence. It was a good, soft, nice afternoon, even if the storm was howling outside the window. An unproductive and so much a necessary time for both of them, just to be with each other, like those old couples that every teenager laughs about.

Finally, one of them opened a book, the other one a laptop, diving into their own stuff, but still feeling each other presence, being able to touch hands in any moment.

It was a nice feeling.

Rachel prepared the letter to her dad. It included a lot of numbers, details and information, but it was a good start. She even created an Excel spreadsheet, including everything he forgot to pay for. She wasn’t keen on talking to him again, not after the last time, so she just decided to send him an old-fashioned electronic message, and then make a quick follow up call in a few days.

She looked at Chloe, who secretly was going through her chemistry notes, trying to pick up where she had left off. Rachel knew her girl was smart, she had an excellent taste in women, so there was no surprise. Chloe tended to treat everything as a challenge and coming back to school was no exception. She would complain and curse, sometimes even cry, but she would do it, no question about it. It was selfish to ask her to attend Blackwell again, but seeing how much she hid her excitement made Rachel felt better.

She had been so thrilled and preoccupied lately that she just realized she hadn’t thought about a fix for days now. It was a pleasant thought - it meant she had really kicked it off and could seriously start to plan their life together. Fuck. When did she become such a domesticated bitch?

The buzzing sound of the door ring woke them up from the lazy lethargy.

“Shit, it’s the delivery.” Chloe got up and ran down the stairs, forgetting about the kiss when she left the room. Rachel shook her head. She knew that things between Chloe and David were rough, but they both shared the passion for fixing dead-beat cars. She expected her girlfriend to be way dirtier from grease and oil in the next few days, since she always demanded to accompany her step-dad on his gearhead adventures. It was always awkward and heated up with a lot of arguments, screams and frustration, but there was a common interest and a possible understanding at the end of the dark tunnel.

She sighed deeply, satisfied with the email she composed to her father with all the Excel bullshit and the money demands. Hopefully he wouldn’t negotiate those terms, but she left herself some room, exaggerating the expenses a little but, just in case he decided to do so.
It was time to send it. Click. And there we go.

She noticed a message appearing on her outbox. It wasn’t a penis enlargement scam or a generous offer of diamonds from a foreign African country. It was something else. Personal. Rachel frowned, opened it and started to read.

From: Max Caulfield
To: Rachel Amber
Subject: A few things.

Hi Rachel,

It’s Max. I know it’s weird that I’m writing to you but I really have to tell you something in secret. I hope you can keep it only between us and don’t involve anybody else. Especially Chloe.

She told me you are getting back to school and I’m super happy for both of you, like really. It will be awesome to hang out with you both and Steph on the campus. Steph says hi BTW.

I wanted to talk to you in person, but I really have to go back to Seattle tonight, so I won’t have a chance… Anyway, this will sound super stupid, but I just want to warn you not to take any photography class or no class whatsoever with Mark Jefferson. He is a creep, even fucking more than that, and is dangerous. He can hurt you, Rachel, and I’m fucking serious. Don’t go near him, even if you have to. Chloe won’t be able to protect you, no one will.

Jefferson will try to charm you, he will tempt you and then fucking destroy you. He means trouble, for realz. It’s no joke Rachel, I’ve seen what he can do to a girl and it’s scary. But not like seducing minors scary, more like assault way shit.

I know it probably sounds stupid and you think I’m paranoid. I can’t tell you any details except asking you to trust me. I know we don’t really know each other very well, but for Chloe’s sake I beg you, avoid this guy like the plague.

One day maybe I will have the courage to explain more. Maybe.

Max

"He will tempt you and then fucking destroy you. He means trouble…"

A year ago, it would sound alluring to Rachel Amber. Now, it was fucking terrifying.
Chloe scoffed with frustration when David passed her the wrong tool. Again.

“For fuck’s sake!” She lifted her head, wiping her greasy hands on her pants. “I need the small one, not the as-big-as-your-asshole one.”

“Language, soldier.” He always paid attention to the less important things. They were trying to repair this wreck dragged out of nowhere - Mustang 1971, a former beauty of the road, now in terrible shape, eaten by rust and mildew. The effort had started a few hours ago, but they hadn’t achieved much, even with the special tools and parts David had spent a fortune on.

Their cooperation was unusually usual, with a spice of awkwardness. There were always a lot of fights, arguments, flying metal parts and even yelling, but they kept coming back to this garage and working consecutively on the next derelict David organized. Others would call it ‘family time,’ it was indeed, as strange as their family was.

David vanished inside of the garage, looking for the right tool. Chloe shook her head, glancing at the engine. The dead heart of the car didn’t look fixable, all Mustangs from that year had heart problems, but she loved challenges, even the most unrealistic to accomplish.

She had to admit, even if only inside, that she liked the time with David, surrounded by screws, wires and the smell of gasoline. It was giving her a sense of completion and efficiency, and the time was spent productively. Chloe didn’t respect David, she had never learned how to respect him and how to place him in her own family picture, but they started to get along... well... somehow.

It was also giving her space to think, even if her step-father was being an ass. She loved her time with Rachel, every minute and every second of it, but sometimes she just needed this alone-wolf time, just to organize her own twisted mind, manage furious thoughts, think about the next step. Lately, it became even more important. Rachel had come back into her life, into her arms and with her dominance on every single level. Chloe had taken care of her for months, being in charge, and now the dynamic was slowly changing again, bringing a lot of issues the blue-haired girl had to deal with.

Like Frank.

She forgot about this asshole, this affair, forgave and moved on, at least it seemed like it. But every time Rachel was in full control, demanding and tempting, her mind switched immediately recalling what her girl had done. Chloe knew she needed some kind of closure, but on the other hand, what gives? Was she supposed to find Frank, slap him, kick his ass and tell him how much she hated him for what he had he done? Would that help? He wasn’t the only one to blame and Rachel was trying to repay her every single day.

Damn it.

Chloe looked at the dead engine again. She didn’t want to be eaten up by hatred and vexation, she finally found her reason to be alive, to strive for the better, but just couldn’t let this thing go. Maybe she should talk to Max? It would be childish to complain about Rachel to somebody else though. Who was she supposed to talk to? Was she allowed to complain at all?

Fuck, it was hard.

It was taking David forever. Chloe rolled her eyes, trying to brush off her troubles from her mind and
then got back to reality hearing a very loud noise, accompanied with even more disturbing turmoil. She ran inside and found him on the floor with a bleeding hand. Scattered tools, utensils, devices and instruments suggested he tried to take down one of the heavy boxes from the top shelf. It ended badly.

“Are you ok? Do you need anything?” She kneeled by his side.

“A band aid would be helpful. Damn, I’m getting old.” He slowly got up, brushing off the dirt and muck from his pants. His knees were shaking a little bit and it was the first time in his life he showed any kind of weakness to Chloe.

The military supplies were always close at hand, so it wasn’t hard to find the right ingredients and help the wounded soldier in the garage battlefield. She put the band aid on, not forgetting to disinfect and clean up the wound before. Chloe had practice after all those cuts and scars the junkyard had given her.

“Let’s take a break.” She suggested, helping him to stand up straight. It was probably one of the nicest things she had ever done for him, but kept ignoring his startled gaze.

“Good idea.” He agreed, following her outside. They both leaned on the broken car, while Chloe was searching her pockets for a smoke. Usually she would hear a word or two about tobacco use, especially in this house and how bad it was for a young heart and body in general, but David was just standing by her side massaging his patched-up hand.

“So, about this girl of yours...” He said, and stopped, as rapidly as he had started.

“Rachel.” Chloe gladly reminded him the name of the person who had been living in this house for over two months now. Damn, he really had balls to talk about Rachel now. If he’s going to raise hell, she will crash him down though.

“Yes, Rachel. She’s a very lovely young lady. She likes you a lot.” David wasn’t looking at his step-daughter, and instead studied his new combat wound. He didn’t even stare at the engine, which was troubling and weird. Chloe could feel where it was going.

“Are we really gonna have this manly fucking talk, in front of a broken V8 engine?”

Silence. Another unusual thing. Her life lately was a collection of random surprises, awkward situations and abnormal coincidences, plus silence. Chloe sighed.

“All right. If you want to say something, spill the beans, really. I’m not gonna bite.” And she bit her lip trying to hide her curiosity. David was accepting the situation like it was so far, no questions asked. He made a few comments here and there, but surprisingly didn’t start a single argument about Rachel being around for an abnormally long period of time. He helped when needed, provided when expected, and got back to the step-shadow corner he was usually sitting in.

“You’re planning this thing... you know, going? Like long term?”

“It’s been going on for some time already. Like years, David.” It was satisfying to actually break the news to him. Chloe felt kind of proud that she had kept this relationship going for so long. It had been and still was a bumpy road, but she hadn’t fucked it up.

“I assumed it, yes.” He nodded fast, like the trained soldier he was. Soldiers weren’t trained to have a talk like this though. “But the future… you think about the future. I can see it. It’s good. School and stuff. With Rachel.”
“Yeah.” There was not much to say. She inhaled the smoke deeply.

“And is she going to move to the dorms?”

“Fuck no.” Chloe snapped angrily and then breathed out fast. The grey cloud whirled around her aggressively. Then, she calmed down suddenly, sighing with resignation. Her parents needed some kind of explanation, and for Rachel’s sake it was way better to act civil with David and discuss it rather than getting into another argument with her girlfriend present. “I really want her to stay here. With us. With me. If possible.”

This whole talk with short, suppressed sentences was playing on her nerves. It reminded her of the worst and most cringing moments of her life and the memories weren’t lovely.

“Oh ok, its fine. I just wanted to ask, soldier. I’m not against it. Really.” David tapped the side of the car, as a replacement for reassuring his step-daughter instead. The hollow sound resonated weirdly, creating an invisible barrier of awkwardness between them.

That was new. Was she getting a blessing from the step-douche now? Rachel will fucking flip.

“Are you gonna finally stop cracking jokes on her about sleeping on the fucking couch then?” She smirked, not sure if it was the right moment for such blunt jokes or not, but she didn’t have any more cards up her sleeve.

“Maybe. She hasn’t slept on this couch a single night anyway.” Oh god, he was smiling a little bit under that moustache of his. Did they really just joke about her sex life?

“She did. One time.” Chloe stated the part-truth. Rachel spent like a few hours downstairs, just to sneak in into her bedroom.

“Chloe, let’s be serious. I see what’s going on in this house.” If her mom would give her that look, she would blush. David had a cocky smile instead.

“So, you are not blind, thank God. My mother will be very fucking happy.” She probably should thank him for the support, but forgot how to thank him for anything. Actually, she never had.

“Are you going to… marry her or something?” David was torn between looking at her and avoiding her questioning gaze. He crossed his hands on his chest and coughed a few times.

“What?” The hand holding the smoke froze in place.

The word ‘marriage’ appeared quite often during her conversations with other people. Especially recently. Even Rachel mentioned something though. It was just a stupid joke, she wasn’t serious, he wasn’t serious either. Right?

“Well I don’t know, if it’s serious, men usually think about those things.” Her step-father finally found the courage to meet her eyes.

“Oh boy you are blind after all!” It was time for Chloe to keep away from him. “Breaking news! I’m not a guy!”

“Chloe, I really support you with it.” The calm voice of her step-father was anxiously soothing. “She... Rachel is a lovely young lady and you already started to think about your future. It’s a good sign, I’m really glad. Your mother is also happy, especially with the idea of getting your diploma. You’re smart and you can achieve a lot, and I can see that there is one thing that keeps you going, Chloe.” He changed position, hiding his edginess, resting one leg on the rusted bumper. “You have a
good thing there. Don’t waste it. Do the right thing.”

Why is it happening again? She tried really hard imagining her own dad, her real dad talking to her right now, telling her those things. And he probably would say something similar. It was a scary thought.

“Well I don’t know...” Her palms were sweaty and the smoke burnt out already. “I mean we are together... We want to finish school first, and then we will see... I mean not like we will see about us... Us two are out of discussion. I just can’t plan that many things at once, I guess.”

She felt like a little kid again, giving a cumbersome explanation. Fighting her own temper, she grinded her teeth. No one told her that this coming out thing would be an ongoing process, not a one-time witty comment shutting up everybody. No one told her she would have to explain herself in the weirdest possible situations and scenarios, not because she was forced to, but because she really wanted people to understand. No one told her she would have to do it her whole life, day by day, week after week. All the fucking time, over and over again.

She would be damn grateful, if somebody had told her that, describe it, give a road map. No map so far, let’s drive blindfolded.

“Do you need any money?” The response brought her back to the reality of the calm, uneasy morning.

“For what?” Chloe frowned, not sure if she missed the context of the question or if there was none.

“School, expenses, engagement ring.” David shrugged. And smiled. Again. It was one of those things she tried to escape from. Chloe never wanted to be on good terms with him, it would be a treason, a betrayal, but she couldn’t remember why exactly.

“Do you have a beer?” She mumbled, getting another cigarette. Her tendency to smoke more while facing stressful situations was passed from generation to generation in the Price family.

“You are not 21 yet.”

“You are talking to me about the marriage shit. Give me a bottle.” He obtained, and two caps ringed when executed from the bottles’ necks. “What the hell happened with the whole ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy you and your friends were hella keen about?”

“It got abolished.” David tapped her bottle with his before taking a strong sip. “Chloe, I know things weren’t easy between us. I really don’t like to use my own experiences as an excuse, but the combat... it does that to people. It’s hard for me to find the right words sometimes. Or stop.”

“Yeah I got it.” The beer was helping. “It’s ok, I was the queen of shitty anyway.” It felt good to actually say that. Like some things were changing, some gears shifting in the rusted and moldy transmission of their relationship, finally finding the right spot, a semi-peaceful place.

“I know you do and I know you were trying.” Chloe felt like talking. She should be angry and annoyed though. “I don’t mind you... here. Being part of us. Just I forgot how to talk to you not being angry. I never tried.”

It felt absurd just to sit with him outside and talk like that. It felt wrong and right at the same time.

“Maybe we will work it out.” He looked at her from above his half-empty bottle. Damn, he drank it fast.
“We’re hella trying now, right David?” She looked back, not hiding like usual.

“Right.”

It felt good to have his back. It felt lighthearted. They both were finishing their beers in silence looking at the sky, not in urge to argue or fight again. Not now anyway. Not today.

The clouds were getting darker though. It was about to start raining. Again.

***

It was stormy. The whole town, sometimes adorable and shining with its simplicity when the sun was being generous, changed into a muddy swamp, while raining. The waves crashed on the shore loudly, running away from a muffled thunder on the horizon.

It was a perfect day to stay at home or bunker in The Two Whales with a good, fresh coffee and some waffles on the side. Rachel chose the other option, since she couldn’t focus in the living room, listening to the gearhead adventures. Chloe and David, playing angry mechanics in the garage, were usually loud and obnoxious to each other, and that wouldn’t help her to concentrate.

The Two Whales felt like a home too; the murmur of scattered talks between the customers, the sound of Joyce’s steps, the smell of fried beacon and melted cheese, the raindrops playing their song on the restaurant’s windows. Rachel liked to be here, sitting alone and going through her notes, schedules, sometimes reading a book or a play. She hadn’t done it for a long time, trapped in the lovely vacuum only with Chloe, between the four walls of their bedroom, going through the worst time of her life, and experiencing the best relationship possible. Since she wanted to get back to school and to the world in general, it would be nice to get used to other people again. Socialize.

Rachel didn’t really strive for company though. She had everything she wanted emotionally, but it was good to confront the world sometimes. And to miss Chloe a little bit. Just a short-term longing, to feel even happier in her arms when they reunited.

She was checking her email compulsively, hoping for any kind of response from her father. Her demands weren’t small by any means, financially and troubling for her family as well, so they needed some time to think it through. It was reasonable for them to not respond at once, so Rachel wasn’t surprised, but it was beyond nerve-wracking. Therefore, it was better to keep herself busy instead.

She grabbed the freshly bought book and lost herself in the written sentences. It was quite unexpected that learning could give so much pleasure. She missed it, she liked absorbing new things, discovering new meanings behind the well-known facts. The pleasure didn’t last long though.

A young man with his perfect clothes and perfect hair took a seat in her booth, just in front of her. She knew this guy very well, but decided to ignore him, just in case. He didn’t ask for permission after all. Rude.

He moved rapidly, like a sudden twitch shook his body, then again, probably trying to get her attention. Technically he succeeded, but Rachel didn’t waste a single look on him.

“What are you doing here, huh?” He spoke finally. His voice was trembling, filled with anger and anxiety. His fingers were bending constantly in an odd spasm. “You got lost or sniffing for a fix again?”
“It’s nice to see you too, Nathan.” Her eyes were still slipping through the written paragraphs of the textbook. “But if you don’t mind – fuck off. I’m not in the mood.”

“I heard some exciting news.” Nathan leaned in her direction, and his loud voice changed into a mocking whisper. “You and the dead-beat of yours are getting back to school. Rachel Amber is fucking getting back to Blackwell. Fuck me.” Then, he sat back. His fingers were playing a very fast-paced symphony on the table. Rachel noticed how her coffee’s surface was reacting to the tune as well.

She didn’t respond, just turning the page over instead. Ignoring Nathan rarely worked, but Rachel really didn’t want to get into a pointless argument.

“So, is it true about you and Price though? You decided to be a full-time dyke now? I thought it was a temporary girl toy shit or whatthefuckever you wanna call her.” Nathan’s presence intensified. “It’s a fucking shame.”

The rain stared to drum over the dinner’s windows with even more profound strength and noise. The steady beat was usually soothing, now it sounded like an overture before the final attack. She wanted to face the world today, so here it was. Fuck socializing.

Rachel still didn’t respond, but she couldn’t recall what was she reading a second ago. The printed words didn’t make any sense anymore.

“Give me a call, when you strive for a good fuck.” He leaned across the table again. She could feel his breath, his anger and fear. “And a real man, you know, with a dick, not a fucking substitute like your shitty cunt.” Nathan hoped she would hit him or react, and the disappointment was wearing him down slowly. Good. “Why are you keeping this clingy bitch around anyway? Is that a pity fuck or something?”

Rachel didn’t respond.

She felt like the sins of the past were trying to get her again. A long time ago they were almost good friends. A long time ago they had been partying together, drinking, laughing, smoking and getting stoned. A long time ago he kissed her when she was almost dead drunk and literally couldn’t get up from her chair. She pushed him away then, but this push wasn’t strong enough through this day. He kept coming back, provoking, enraging, exasperating and hoping. Nathan’s mental state was getting worse and Rachel was painfully aware of it. That was the only reason she hadn’t smacked him yet, but he was dancing on a fine line now.

“Is she paying you for fucking her, or is that just one of your charity cases?” And off he crossed the line.

Rachel responded. Finally. Fast and rapid. She grabbed his perfectly ironed shirt and dragged his face closer. Her book dropped and knocked down the coffee mug, splashing the dark liquid around the table and beyond. Her eyes narrowed, filled with frustration and fury.

“Don’t you dare talk about my woman like that again.”

“Woo-hoo, a woman! People, did you hear that? Fucking Rachel Amber decides…” He laughed in her face and looked around hoping everybody was as amused as he was. She didn’t let him finish.

“She is fifty times the man you will ever be. And trust me, you don’t want to go there and discuss this stuff now or never. Let it go Nathan.” She stated, finally releasing her grip and pushing him back to his seat. “Don’t cross this line again. For your own sake.”
“Or what?” His annoying smirk was still there, even if bitterness and pain shadowed his gaze. “You gonna complain to your fucking blue pitbull? Huh? A fucking whore and junkie, a fallen fucking queen.” He almost spat in her direction. Dealing with rejection wasn’t his forte, it never had been. “You should be fucking grateful that somebody still wants to touch you after all the shit you’ve done.”

Rachel tucked her hair behind her ear, supposedly calm and patient again. The only sign of her anger was her blue earring moving back and forth in a wild dance of frustration.

“I feel sorry for you Nathan. You just want to make other people’s lives miserable so you could forget how much your father hates you. I don’t hate you though, but if you offend Chloe one more time…”

“Chloe Fucking Price.” He hissed.

“The one and only. If you try this one more time, I will make your life miserable. You know I can and you know what I’m capable of. Feeling sorry for you won’t stop me if you’re gonna keep getting into my business. Do you understand?” She was dangerously serene during her speech. It sounded almost like polite Christmas wishes, if you forgot the meaning behind the words. And the fact that it was July.

“Oh my god, what’s going on here?” The sweet voice of Victoria Chase popped out of nowhere. The new princess of Blackwell heard the argument and probably even recorded it on her phone. Of course, she had to be there. Her and Nathan were almost joined at head. On the other hand, it was a stormy afternoon in Arcadia Bay and The Two Whales served the best burgers on the west coast. Where else would they be?

“Nathan doesn’t feel well.” Rachel looked at her former colleague and former competition totally unflustered. “It would be great if you could take him for a walk.”

“It’s raining.” Damn, this girl could really be clueless.

“I’m not a fucking dog!” Nathan got up in hustle, almost jumping off his seat. “Don’t ever tell me what to do!”

“It’s just a simple warning.” Rachel shrugged and grabbed the book again, brushing off the drops of coffee from the main cover. “You can do whatever pleases you. I simply don’t care.”

“What’s going on here?” Joyce walked to them, unwittingly repeating exactly the same question as Victoria. She noticed the mess on the table and grew suspicious. “What’s wrong?” She stood by Rachel, like trying to protect her. It was sweet and uncomfortable at the same time.

“Nothing much Joyce, thank you.” Rachel’s smirk was sad. She was sad. And tired. “They are just leaving.” Nathan was furiously walking to the main door indeed. Victoria tried to keep up with his pace, but slipped a little bit on the wet floor.

“I will remember this, Amber. I will fucking remember this.” He turned his back to her just before leaving the dinner. Nathan’s face was red, the veins on his neck pulsating. He took it worse than expected. She really got to him. Good.

“I really hope so.” Rachel gave him the most charming smile she had in her impressive collection. The clamor of the slammed door was taken with a sigh of a relief.

Now it was time for Joyce to sit in front of her. Chloe’s mother cleaned up the table in record time, used to similar situations more than she should be. Rachel tried to help, lifting her stuff, but she was
“I’m sorry, Joyce.” She breathed out finally, wishing she could go for a smoke and calm her nerves. The rain complicated those plans.

“It’s fine, kid. You just have to ignore him.” Joyce stood up and squeezed Rachel’s hand quickly. She probably heard the whole conversation, but didn’t want to comment or interfere. Always so respectful, so warm and so understanding.

“I tried. I can’t. He was talking shit about Chloe.” Rachel knew it was a reckless excuse, but she couldn’t lie. If Nathan had limited his stupid game only to cursing and offending her, she wouldn’t explode. Not to that extent. She suddenly realized how protective she grew of her blue-haired treasure. It was scary and sweet at the same time. “No one can talk shit about Chloe.” She murmured to herself, with her eyes still narrowed, forgetting who was standing by her side still listening.

“Let me bring you a new cup of coffee, alright?” Joyce stroked her head in a protective gesture. “You cut your hand.” She added. “Sit back and relax. It’s fine, Rachel.” And there she went to the counter taking care of the demanding and hungry customers.

Rachel looked at her hand in surprise. There was a small cut indeed, she had to hook her palm over Nathan’s jacket or something. It wasn’t bleeding much, not even itching, but somehow it made her giggle. A combat wound from a battle fought for a good cause. Could it be more theatrical?

Rachel abruptly understood that getting back to school, getting back to Blackwell in particular, wouldn’t be as easy and pleasant as she had imagined. Things had changed, she had changed, and damn, she had to control herself more. Vacation for society and people in general made her lazy and careless, almost as careless as Chloe. Chloe. She smiled repeating the name in her mind. The thought made her feel like home again.

The next coffee helped, along with the banana pancakes and a blueberry muffin. Let’s read, let’s prepare, let’s forget. She wouldn’t bother herself with the distress of the whole fucking thing.

She texted Cloe with a simple “I miss you”. The response came almost immediately “I miss you more.” And then another text: “Come back home. Cuddle time.” Rachel had to smile. Again, she was hopelessly in love. Was she always that much into this girl?

“I wanted to say it’s nice to see you again, but I’m not sure…” When Rachel lifted her head, she saw Steph Gingrich standing in front of her. Is the whole town here today? She welcomed her to the booth with a gesture, putting away her phone. Chloe would have to wait a little. Not much though.

“Nice to see you too, Steph. And don’t worry, it’s fine. It was just Nathan being Nathan.” She explained, pretty sure that half of the restaurant heard and saw their argument, therefore no clarification was needed.

“Yeah, I noticed.” Steph was always bringing a mix of positive energy and magic wisdom to the table, this time she did it literally. Sitting with her face to face was actually very encouraging and reposeful. “He is being nasty to everybody, leave that cockroach to himself. Wanna talk?”

“Sure. I wouldn’t mind actually.” Rachel took a sip of coffee, watching Steph also grabbing a fresh cup. Planning to bitch about life never felt as good as now. “Hey, congrats to you and Max. Chloe gave me the news.”

“Yeah, I’m fucking doomed, man.” Steph flashed a shy smile, but her gaze was surprisingly confident. “I found the perfect girl and she’s in Seattle most of the time. This long-distance thing is
“killing me.” As far as Rachel remembered, Max came back home only several hours ago, so her girlfriend was still in a desperate state of unextinguished longing. The blonde knew this state very well, she was quite a veteran in that field.

“But you’re bringing her here.” She reassured Steph quickly. “Well, you and the new, charming Blackwell College.”

“True,” Steph was probably still thinking of Max. It seemed that she didn’t think much about anything else. Damn, girls in love with girls, they were all doomed indeed. “But still we would have to wait like six more weeks before she moves in. That’s like forever. I know I’m venting now, but fuck…”

“It’s fine, I know the pain.” Rachel didn’t lie.

“Really?” Steph rose her eyebrow in a sympathetic question. “You have Chloe by your side all the time.” Then she backed off immediately, realizing they don’t know each other that well after all. “Damn, sorry if I’m getting into your business…”

“Oh, Max gave you some insight info?” Rachel didn’t mind, on the contrary. It was good just to talk freely with somebody who wouldn’t start an uncomfortable investigation at the same time. She missed careless talks about supposedly trivial problems. “It’s fine, really. Everybody knows or will know soon enough. But there was a time… well… I had to wait for Chloe, like months, fuck me, it was a torture.”

“Yeah.” Steph was always very respectful. Sometimes too much. She didn’t want to dig more than necessary, or not even dig at all. It was a fresh alteration from the latest events, when everybody strived to know more about Rachel, her relationship and her life in general.

“So, how did you and Max…?” The blonde decided to change the subject. “If you don’t mind me asking…”

“Ah, a stupid coincidence.” Steph waved her hand and blushed a little bit. She didn’t mind this question at all, she wanted to talk about Max probably more than anybody wanted to listen.

“Dare to elaborate?” Rachel was curious. She had known Steph for years, more as an acquaintance than a friend, and found it astonishingly interesting that she was involved with Max. Truly involved. Deep down she found it reassuring and the wave of unintentional jealousy she always experienced while Max Caulfield was mentioned wasn’t as overwhelming this time.

“Why the hell not. What’s a better use of my time than a little bit of gay gossip.” It was satisfying to see how grateful Steph was to be able to talk more about her relationship. “I was doing this project with stage management in Seattle last fall. Sometimes I do some freelance jobs on the side, you know, to pay for college and stuff. Anyway, it was for one of the photo exhibitions, super fancy place, good portfolio thing. Max was there, of course, my cute photography freak. I couldn’t stop staring at her so I made a move. The rest is history.”

Rachel’s curiosity wasn’t fulfilled, but she wouldn’t like to be flooded with the details of what happened next. Assumptions were more than enough. Max Caulfield was taken. It was good, right?

“And now she’s packing her stuff and moving to Arcadia Bay. You got game girl. I’m happy for you though. Can’t wait to hang out with you guys.”

Steph’s brow furrowed in yet another question mark. Rachel, buffed with this reaction, leaned on her seat, playing with the ear of the mug uncomfortably. This wasn’t just a pleasant talk after all, a
conversation between semi-friends. The previously muted background sound of another rapid wave of rain cooled down the atmosphere a good ten degrees.

“Really?” Steph asked with a tensed voice.

“Why not?”

“I mean… You are not…” Here was the spark in Steph’s eye. She wanted to ask, she assumed something, and tried to switch the rail tracks of the discussion exactly where she wanted it to be. It was uneasy, anxious and somewhat adorable, but not that necessary. She wanted to chat about something, but she really didn’t have to.

Then Rachel understood.

“Jealous?” She smirked. It was a sad grin, but she tried to play it cool, spontaneous, normal, casual.

“She told you.” Steph was more than relieved that she didn’t have to dance around the touchy subject. “I mean, I don’t know who told you, but Max and Chloe…”

Finally. The atmosphere intensified, the raindrops were even louder, blasting her own thoughts.

“Ah this. I wouldn’t worry about it...” Another sip of coffee didn’t save her from Steph’s enquiring look. “What? Are you worrying about it?” Now, this was upsetting.

“Not that much, but well, it wasn’t nice.” Steph shrugged, like it was no burden. It was surprising how often you have to lie in a relationship sometimes, to not go crazy.

“It wasn’t.” Rachel agreed, knowing they were on the same boat, same ship. This ship had sailed though, and it was up to them to know how to steer this beast. “Steph, they were childhood friends, it sparked, it happened. It won’t repeat.”

The queen of indoor kids relaxed a little bit, nodding with a short laugh. She was waiting for reassurance, even a false one. Rachel wasn’t lying. The only thing she was sure about in her life was Chloe. It was good to talk to somebody about it anyway. It was good to have an ally in this mess.

“I love the fact you really don’t give a fuck about it. Max couldn’t shut up about it though.”

“Oh really?” That was concerning. A little bit. A whole fucking much.

“Yeah, she has those dreams…” Steph lifted her head thinking intensely, carried away just like during one of her DND sessions.

“Whoa, TMI alert!” Rachel rose her hands in a preventing gesture.

“Not like that.” Steph scoffed. “All right, let me explain before you freak the fuck out. Max has these weird dreams of a huge disaster, a tornado or something, and Chloe is part of it. She thinks that what they did… was a part of it somehow? Like it was a different life or stuff like that. Like something she missed in another timeline?” She scratched her cheek, still wondering how to address the issue. With all her experience with role-play games, she still felt uneasy.

“Symbolic.” Damn, she was almost done with her coffee and knew Joyce wouldn’t let her get a beer. She would drink one with Steph, for sure. They could even get trashed together, talking about their issues. It felt like high school again, but it was way more severe. For all of them involved.

“Like what?”
“It’s quite simple.” Rachel finished her coffee with one long gulp. Caffeine always helped with the interpretations of the universe’s secrets, or so she was told at her drama club years ago. “A tornado, symbol of destruction of the childhood friendship, the disastrous guilt for abandoning and forgetting your best friend, and then a hope for reconciliation through the simplest – and yes, not fucking nice -way.” She rose her hands again, to point one more time how not important this event was for her. “Me and Chloe… We’ve been through some tough shit back then and I can’t blame…” She rolled her eyes, stumbling. “Well, all right, I was jealous, ok? But Max and Chloe are trying to rebuild what they had lost years ago, so…”

“Maybe…” It was bothering Steph way more than Rachel expected, so she just hid her worrying look behind the salutary mug, empty, but still useful. “Sorry, if I bore you with the private stuff.”

“Come on Steph, chill. Max is like a sister to Chloe, well, except this one fucking time, so technically we are almost a happy family now.” Uplifting phrases were always appreciated, even if cheap.

Steph looked at her phone, probably waiting for another message from Max and smiled genuinely. So, the famous Seattle resident responded. Rachel checked her own device, no love for her at the moment, but she will damn fix it, after she came back home. She didn’t have to wait 6 weeks so might as well take advantage of the beautiful circumstance.

“So, what’re you up to?” Steph decided to change the topic, sensing the right moment as always. “Except the destruction of Nathan Prescott’s perfect look?”

“Prepping for school, so hella boring, especially in July. How is Blackwell these days?”

“Filled with assholes and shit.” Another shrug, this time way more playful. It was a simple obligation to bitch about school, even if you loved your classes to death. The ritual was unchangeable, but randomly inappropriate, especially now, after everything they had to put up with to get back to the old Blackwell walls.

“Pity. I liked school.”

“We have a lot of going on since Blackwell became a college too.” Steph couldn’t lie either. She liked to attend and was as passionate about stage management as Max was about photography. They both probably spent days on discussion about some terribly expensive equipment.

“What’s changed?”

“More teachers, some of them really good. New gear, new rules and more annoying people. What classes do you want to take? It’s your senior year, right?”

Rachel nodded shyly, knowing that she was a year behind her colleague, and then showed her the textbook, still sticky from the spilled coffee. Steph whistled.

“Oh damn, Amber, pre-law, not bad! I would never guess you wanted to be a lawyer.”

“Just trying stuff.” It was months, if not years since somebody appreciated her academic abilities. “Plus, I have some experience.”

“As a lawyer?” Steph blinked in confusion.

“No, on the other side.” Rachel winked more teasingly than she wanted. She heard many times how you could use your bad experiences for a good cause, and since everything was happening for a reason, why not try.
“Ah I see. Well, I hope you could put it to good use, especially with this Prescott shit.”

Joyce came to their table and filled their mugs without a single question. It almost felt like a blood donation, finally some fresh, hot adrenaline pumped into their veins, so much needed in a rainy day.

“If he really tries again…” Rachel shook her head feeling an upcoming wave of returning anger. She didn’t even try to blame the coffee.

“He will, you know him.” Steph was always amazingly honest and that made her an Arcadia Bay precious gem. She didn’t sugarcoat this time either. “Fucking daddy’s boy. He always wanted to get into your pants and now suffers in despair, knowing you are gay.”

“I’m not gay.” Rachel’s gaze got a little bit cold.

“You can call it whatever you want, Rachel, and if you don’t need fucking labels, it’s fine.” Steph sighed and shrugged. “But since you and Chloe became an item, people will assume you are gay. No one would ask or care about your previous experiences or the whole spectrum of your sexuality. They will judge you only through your actual thing and the person you are with. That’s life. That’s high school.”

The silence filled with unanswered personal questions. Steph wasn’t waiting for any kind of comment, she was just like a storm of knowledge and good advice. You could take it or leave it, it wouldn’t change the fact that she was usually right and spot on.

“That’s actually…” Rachel cleaned her throat. “An interesting perspective.”

“Unless you are just friends with benefits or shit like that. Or not exclusive.” The untold inkling was more than visible, but Rachel couldn’t even think about that possibility.

“We are totally exclusive.” She stated firmly. Chloe was hers, full stop.

“Damn, I remember your beginning.” It was a nice touch to get back to memories, memories they could both share. Steph always had class. “The play thing, the whole fire after. Two adorable dorks in love, an adorkable item. Chloe was going fucking crazy and frantic, not knowing if she should tell you or not. And you stalking her like hell and asking everybody what they knew about the famous Blackwell badass.”

“Shut up.” A cute mumble was the only answer.

“Damn Amber, you’re blushing!” Steph had to laugh. She finished her drink, and was getting ready to leave. Her phone beeped again, so it was time to talk to Max, as Rachel assumed. The girl comes first, before any kind of small-talk. “I would’ve never thought you would fall so hard for Chloe Price.”

“…And I would’ve never thought I would have this talk with you… But Steph…” She stopped the girl, before she left the booth.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. Really. Thank you.”

***
It was pouring like crazy when she left the dinner, running to Chloe’s truck parked on the back. She should have known the weather would change and left the car closer to the entrance, but this damn thing was so hard to drive and usually took her a little bit more time and space to position it properly. Chloe was driving like a maniac, which was proven by the uncountable number of parking tickets, and left her truck wherever she wanted and how she wanted, not troubled by any regulations, laws or instructions. Rachel was the exact opposite.

Her waterproof jacket wasn’t Oregon waterproof evidently, and she was totally wet, from head to toe when finally saw the truck. A resurrected miracle of motorization was a constant reminder of nice memories, always hitting her sentimental side. It was a piece of trash, it was a dangerous ride, but it felt like home.

She almost ran with the keys prepared in her hand when she spotted a very well-known RV in the corner of the parking lot. Just in front of her transportation wonder. Not blocking her yet, but almost, like in an aggressive stance, a warning. The RV looked empty and abandoned, but she knew better. It was never unoccupied, unless his owner was sitting inside of The Two Whales.

Shit.

Maybe if she was fast enough she could run, cover herself more with the hood, maybe he wouldn’t spot her. A weak chance, but what gives. She rushed to the car and almost got there, but a raspy voice forced her to stop. And turned back.

“Rachel.” He changed. He changed a lot. Now miserable, more scared than scary, more worn out. His face, previously always sober, now was melted with emotions, fear and long-term alcohol use.

“Hi, Frank.” The quick response was her only hope for salvation. He crossed her path, stopping her with his firm stance, not touching her, not reaching her arms. Yet.

“Rachel, wait. Please. I just want to talk to you.”

“About?” It sounded way harsher than she wanted it to be. She had no right to blame him. She couldn’t even hold him responsible for taking advantage, or using her, because Rachel wasn’t sure who was using who in the whole excruciating thing. The thing that would fucking haunt her for the rest of her life.

“Don’t be a bitch. I know we had a good thing going and I acted like an idiot and…” He cut to the chase, not caring about a small-talk conveyance. Always direct, not beating around the bush for the pure pleasure of vomiting words. Maybe that’s what had attracted her?

“Frank, I told you, it’s over.” She stated, not leaving a single opportunity for a double meaning or a spark of hope. It had to end, it ended already.

“Doesn’t have to be.” His baseball cap, worn and dirty looked pathetic and sad, drained in the rain and almost falling apart under the torrents of water delivered form the sky. She didn’t dare to look at his face again. “I can’t stand being without you. I miss your laugh and your smile and everything else... Pompidou misses you.”

She had a chance to sneak out, to get to the truck, slam the metal door and run away. But maybe it was the time to confront this monstrous issue. C’mon Amber, you can’t always run away. You promised yourself, promised Chloe. Just do the right thing.

“I’m sorry, Frank.” Why was she feeling guilty again? “I can’t and I don’t want to. We can’t be
together, we can’t even be friends anymore. Whatever it was, it’s done.”

“Why? Because of the drugs?” He whined like a little puppy. It wasn’t calculated by any means, but Rachel’s stomach squeezed with pity.

“No, not only because of the drugs…” She sighed, standing in the rain, entirely hopeless. Taking it out on him would be too simple and unfair. Using an excuse and blaming the vice would be an excellent option, especially for Rachel Amber in her glory days, but right now it felt just plain wrong.

“So, why? It was a good thing, Rachel.” He took a step in her direction, reaching for her, trying to feel her close. She didn’t let him get closer. Her own emotions were so tangled and twisted, she was feeling sick. There was sorrow and disappointment, tons of guilt and heart-wrenching dreams of not dealing with it ever again. An impossible wish.

“Maybe for you… Listen, we had a thing, now we don’t it. You have to move on. I moved on. There is nothing else I can tell you, really.” Nothing but the truth, but not the full truth.

Rachel would give everything to feel Chloe by her side, to feel her presence, her strength and nervous breath. She almost imagined her standing there, having her back, with her hands on her arms, protecting and loving. It would be a terrible idea to involve her in this conversation though, but a girl can dream, right?

What had she done.

“But you want it. I know you want it.” He didn’t give up, stripping himself from dignity with every single word. She had been there, she knew what would happen next. “I heard that shit before. You came back so many times, so you can come back now. We can work it out.”

Was he really believing his persuasions?

“We can’t work anything out, Frank. We... Us... It’s dead. We are dead.” Looking at his damaged and tired eyes was an extreme experience. They looked at each other face to face, no barrier left, no place to hide. “There is nothing left, really. I don’t want to come back and I won’t.”

She had problems expressing herself, couldn’t find the right words, like all her communication ability and social skills floated down the drain with this unstoppable fucking rain. How to kill his hopes and dreams simply, how to finally convince him that she should be dead to him, she will be dead. There was no reasonable explanation he would accept. She really tried to be firm, final, deadly even, but baffling compassion didn’t allow her to strike the last blow, although she struck so many.

He turned away in a helpless gesture, trying to catch a breath in the still pouring rain. Maybe to hide a tear, who knows. The realization hit him, destroyed him and now it was time for one last thing.

Anger.

“Is this because of Chloe? Huh? Is that because of that punk girl again?” He snapped.

Rachel closed her eyes, breathing in deeply. She didn’t want to talk about Chloe at all, not with him, not now, still afraid he would use it against her girl, trying to hurt her, trying to get to her somehow. They both knew Chloe had been in the picture from the very beginning, between them, against them, above and below, always present.

This was also her responsibility, the consequence of her actions. It was the second time today that she had to fight for Chloe and damn she didn’t mind. This battle was entirely different though. It wasn’t them against Frank. It was her against her own fucking mistakes.
“Leave her out of it.” She asked softly.

He looked at her one more time, and started to walk back to his RV. Resignation, despair, everything in these simple, wet steps and uneven movements. He got old, older with a few minutes of this tense conversation. A truly deadly exchange.

“You are naïve, Rachel.” He shot his last bullet, even if he lost the fight already. “She will leave you. She will break your heart.”

So that’s what drug dealers dream about.

“No, Frank, she won’t.” Rachel shook her head. “But I’m really sorry I broke yours.”

She got to the truck, when he rapidly started his engine and drove off from the parking lot, slipping on the wet pavement. The RV shook roughly on the curve, almost falling down. Almost.

Rachel covered her face, still wet from the rain and sweat, and sobbed sharply once, twice and stopped. Frank was gone. Her past was gone. It was time for the future, and fuck, she missed Chloe so damn much.

***

Chloe got back from the garage in a way better mood than she ever expected. A beer, two beers actually, it helped a lot, David wasn’t as annoying as usual, they even kind of bonded after this irritating talk. It was good day, she summarized, taking a shower and transforming from a grease monkey to her normal self. Her phone rang, damn she forgot to check it and there were like 3 missed calls. Mother, mother, Max. And some text messages. Chloe smiled. Rachel comes first. Always.

Then she frowned sensing a different tone between the typed letters. Her girl wanted to meet at the junkyard. That was new and unexpected. Their secret hideout wasn’t necessarily in use these days, since they shared the place together, but maybe Rachel got nostalgic. Or there was something grim and worrying to talk about. Nah, she went to the dinner to eat some pancakes, what could have happened anyway?

Damn, Chloe was always up to visit the junkyard, it was their haven after all, but why did Rachel pick the rainiest day of the whole summer? Not to mention she completely forgot about the small and somehow profound issue – transportation. She had the truck, which meant Chloe would have to either walk, steal David’s car or jump on the train.

The things you do for love.

She checked the time and still had more than enough to actually call someone back. Mom was working, so let’s try Max. It had been months since they chatted, especially after the stupid ‘I dare you to kiss me and then kiss me way more’ situation, but let’s face your problems, Price, let’s save what we can from this friendship.

She didn’t have to wait long for the call to be connected.

“Hi Mad Max, what’s up? Back to the big city?” She jumped on the bed, lied down and reached for the cigarette.
“Yeah, but I can’t wait to get back.” Her friend’s voice was muffled, probably because of the stupid rain and busy traffic around.

“How is your nosebleed?” She could hear Max walking, probably through the amazing Seattle streets, enjoying her big city life. Her hometown was waiting though, tempting her not only with astonishing landscapes.

“Non-existent so far.”

“Good. You hella scared me, Max. I think it’s Arcadia Bay welcoming you home kinda stuff. This town doesn’t play nice with people.”

“Steph’s saying the same thing.” Ah, here we go. The way she pronounced Steph’s name was screaming volumes. But that’s the price if you’re dating a stage manager or girl who is into pumping on volumes in general.

“Steph is a wise woman.” Chloe stated matter-of-factly.

“Damn right she is. I love her very much. So how about your coming back to school?”

“In progress. Rachel is taking care of it. She’s hella to blame for taking me back. To school I mean.” Smoke danced, while evaporated to the ceiling. The blankets and pillows still smelled like jasmine, like Rachel, never like tobacco. That was magic, she guessed.

“Oh, you had a serious talk about your brilliant future? Steph is doing it to me sometimes.” Her friends being so serious about their relationship was a little bit... troubling somehow. Chloe didn’t know how to feel about it. Protective maybe, but of what? Steph was one of the best girls in town, well she wouldn’t consider dating her, but still it was a great match. They were a great match.

“You creep me out, Max. You know too much, like really.” She sighed, trying to hide her concerns along with flicking out the small amount of ash from the smoke. She was invisible anyway, it was a phone call.

“Rachel is a great influence on you.” Max hesitated, seemingly sharing the same concerns as her childhood friend. “I would never be able to force you to do it.”

“She’s a hella bad influence…” Chloe had to pull the phone away, since she just got hit by the sound of a passing ambulance, rushing somewhere on Seattle’s street in full blast. “…And she really didn’t force…”

“So, what did she do?” Max opened and closed the door behind her. The connection got better, as well as her nosiness.

“Well, just asked?” It was true, even if Chloe’s dignity went to shit, while confirming it.

Max laughed out loud, unpacking and changing her clothes. She might’ve just gotten home or another comfy space and her speech was freed from the rapid panting, always produced while walking fast.

“That’s how the pirates end, tamed and stripped from their power and appetite to discover the new world’s treasures.”

“It’s for the booty’s sake.” A day without a sexy joke would be a lost one. Even better with pirates involved.
“And what’s the next thing after you will be done with Blackwell?” She heard water filling a mug. A hot tea probably. Max was very much predictable during days like this one.

“I don’t know, depends on school.” Everybody asked her to make plans, but this time it was nice to share some snippets of it. Mostly because she wouldn’t be judged. “Maybe college, maybe work, maybe whatever.”

“I thought Rach wanted to be a model?” The tea was ready, clothes had been changed, Max was all hers.

“No… not anymore. She doesn’t give a shit about it.” Chloe shook her head exhaling another grey dragon up to the ceiling.

“So, no acting, nothing like that?” Max sounded surprised. Steph had to tell her a lot about the drama club and drama around it, so Chloe wasn’t even staggered by the supposition.

“No, not really. Not that I know of.”

“Hmm…” Max still seemed flabbergasted, quite shocked, actually. Just as if her reality was falling apart. Chloe frowned hearing the sudden and direct change in her voice, not sure how she was supposed to react. “I didn’t expect it. So many things have changed. So many differences…”

“You’re talking riddles, woman! What things?”

“Never mind.” Max brushed it off, like nothing was said. “So, Rach is finding her stuff, what about you Chloe? What are you up to? I really hope it’s nothing illegal.”

“Why is everybody asking the same question… Nothing illegal, pinky promise.” She scratched her head and stretched a little bit. Her back hurt as hell after all this garage work. “Eh, it’s hella stupid. You will laugh, Maximus Prime.”

“Try me.”

“Well, live happily ever after or something…” Now she felt like a dork in love. It was a nice feeling but damn, where was her badassness. No chance to get it back in the nearest future, especially after hearing Max laughing, as predicted.

“Chloe Price, domesticated. I’ve seen everything and can die now. So, a little white house with a little white picket fence and a little white puppy?” It was going too far. Maybe.

“A little white pirate ship. Hey, happily, doesn’t mean boring.” Rachel wouldn’t let her get bored anyway. At a ship or in a house, despite of the color.

“That’s cute.” Damn right it was. “I’m happy she dropped the modeling stuff. It’s draining.”

“Not for you.” It was amusingly interesting why Max was getting back to this modeling business. Was there a hidden agenda or something?

“I’m on the other side of the camera though. But seriously keep her close, Chloe. Don’t let anybody stand in your way. She’s good for you.”

It was random. Max had heard a lot about her girlfriend, not to mention Steph could spill some beans and even add some embarrassing stories to the mix, but Chloe grew skeptical. About the statement only though, Rachel was out of the question. It sounded like her friend really wanted to push her girlfriend harder into Chloe’s arms. Not that it was unpleasant, and almost impossible, but where did
“You don’t know her. Yet.” She said attentively. Off it went, the hope of talking about the Frank issue. Chloe couldn’t just start complaining and venting after that thoughtful proclamation.

“I can feel it. I know how devastated you would be without her.” Max’s voice was soft, like she was recalling a hurtful memory, not talking about an irrational possibility. Weird.

Seattle does that to people.

“How do you know?”

“It’s obvious.” The shrug was hearable somehow. “Chloe?”

“Yeah?” She just finished her smoke, checking the time again. She was about to move her ass anyway; the last train was leaving in a half-hour.

“If you need to talk… about life, Rachel, shit, whatever… You know my phone number.” Max was always getting her, sensing if something was wrong. Even the years without being in touch couldn’t change it.

“Are you gonna pick it up this time?” Chloe couldn’t help herself. Being rejected from Max’s life so many times left an open wound in her heart. It changed into a scar, but was still there.

“Yeah, I will Chloe.” The girl smiled. “I will.”

***

She found Rachel in their secret hideout, sitting alone and smoking. Chloe brushed her wet hair off her face and walked in, through the mud and dirt. The rain was always adding some magic to this place, an extra special kick of enchantment. The rusted piles of trash shone under the rain drops, devastated wrecks of cars radiated like the day they were built. American Rust changed into a magic garden of unexplored treasures, but Chloe already found her own.

She sat by Rachel, now focused on her phone screen, and elbowed her just for good old times’ sake.

“My mother told me you went through a battle for me.” Chloe didn’t want to sound proud, but being loved and protected shouldn’t be underestimated. It was worrying a bit of course, this Prescott shit wasn’t a good candidate for an enemy, mostly because of his rich and powerful parents, but the circumstances required a determined reaction.

“Merely a skirmish.” Rachel gave her the most playful look from those hazel eyes of hers, trying to hide her scratched hand. “It was short, unpleasant and very humiliating for Nathan Prescott.”

“And for you?” Chloe kissed her forehead, then uncovered the hurt hand and kissed it as well. She knew very well her girl wasn’t as tough as she wanted people to think.

“In acceptable standards, I guess.”

“Don’t fight for me.” Chloe asked, even if she didn’t mean to.

It felt good to see the little warrior side of Rachel, even if it could be troubling, dangerous and not
really responsible. Chloe was tired of being responsible, she had to do it all the time and didn’t find it as amusing and liberating as she had previously thought.

“I have to.” The double meaning of it was merely hidden. Rachel sneaked into her arms, cuddling. Cold and bedraggled she really needed some warmth. This warmth in particular. “How was your day, baby?”

Rachel rarely called her baby. It usually was just before a huge fight or after an argument, or when she needed some support. Nathan Prescott had really got to her. Stupid, twisted asshole.

“Fine.” She pulled her closer. “I didn’t fix the car, but drank a beer with David, missed you, talked to Max a bit, missed you more, planned something nasty for the evening, missed you like crazy, aaaaand then got dragged to this dump.”

“Sounds exciting. Can you give me a proper kiss now?”

Chloe was always there to serve and obey and the kiss was more than proper. It started slowly, as a long-waited welcome, then changed into an ‘I missed you the whole day’, and quickly transformed to ‘I can’t stop thinking about you, and oh fuck, we have to break off before it’s too late’ one. Despite of all the passion and her lips crashing on Chloe’s over and over again, Rachel couldn’t hide a taste of sorrow and a frown of concern.

“Did something else happen?” Chloe finally parted them, breathing fast. It was almost too late. Almost. “You wouldn’t be that beat-up only because of Nathan.”

Rachel forgot about the cigarette, which died on the ground, abandoned during the make out session, so she reached for another, a fresh one, feeding on the inhale of a smoke.

“I met Frank today.” She said finally, pulling back and moving a tad further, creating a space and distance. She wouldn’t be able to say it being close.

The storm stopped being romantically magical. It was way gloomier now. All the thoughts Chloe was murdering today resurrected at once, up from their shallow graves.

“Frank? Where?”

“By The Two Whales. Where else?” Rachel didn’t look at her, even if she really wanted. It was shameful that they had to talk about it still, that it was coming back over and over again, one way or another. Shameful and disrespectful. She shrugged, trying to get rid of this feeling. “He parked his shit in front of the dinner, looking for new possible business opportunities. Selling never ends.”

“Looking for you.”

“Possibly.” Another shrug, this time way weaker, a servile one. “We had an argument, I left. That’s it. I wanted you to know.”

“What did he want?” Chloe completely ignored the honesty and being sincere part. She tried to smoke too, but her lighter gave up, the stone got wet and now she was helplessly trying to get a single spark, one small flame to finally breathe in some solace.

“What do you think?” Her girlfriend smirked sadly.

“And what did you say?”

“To fuck off?” If Rachel hoped to just state the fact and move on, the tormented gaze of the most
beautiful blue eyes didn’t let her to renounce this topic. She sighed, ready to elaborate, but not really up to it. “All right. I told him it’s over, it’s been over for months anyway, and he has to move on and stop harassing me.”

Chloe nodded, absorbing the information slowly and carefully. Her throat went completely dry and it was hard to talk, swallow or even breathe.

“You told him about me and you?”

“I didn’t have to. He knew. It’s not rocket science.”

They sat in silence for a long while, smoking, listening to the rain, breathing the smell of wet ground, mud, rusted metal and frustration. The distance was full of obstruction, more than guilt actually. Somebody would have to make a move, or the whole unstable balance would crack again.

A drop of rain, and yet another, and then thousands of them. The world was filled with fucking rain, changing into a swamp, not pleasant to swim in, not easy to walk through.

“Rachel?” Chloe was always the brave one. Sometimes too brave, too blunt, too direct. Sometimes. Not today.

“Yeah?” Came the hallow response.

“We... are faithful, yeah?”

Rachel lifted her head as rapidly as her heart jumped up to her throat. “Are seriously you asking if I’m ever gonna cheat on you again?”

“Yeah.”

Chloe Price was always brave, but her bravery wasn’t required. It was a simple and an easy question to respond to.

“No, I won’t.” She shrank inside again, just like thousands of years ago, when she had to confess, tell the truth and live with the consequences. “It was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made. Never again.”

The silence was still there, grasping them again, killing every spark they had created with the welcome kiss. A sign of mistrust appeared, growing slowly. It felt ugly just seeing it coming.

“It’s still bothering you.” Rachel wasn’t surprised, just upset. She didn’t sacrifice a single thought to what she had done, just decided to move on, leaving Chloe with the stated facts, behind and alone. It felt so selfish again, she felt unapologetically selfish and wanted to slap herself. Hard.

“Uh-huh.”

“Chloe?” Her hand was trying to reach hers, shorten the distance, but Chloe didn’t notice. She was damn fucking numb.

“Uh-huh.”

She felt Rachel’s hand on her cheek, lightly persuading her to look her into her eyes. She didn’t want to, but then she did and drowned herself again in them.

“Can you be honest with me? Without me fighting for every single word and dragging it out of you? Please.” She knew that was a lot to ask for, but there was nothing else she could think of.
They were best friends after all.

“I can’t load this on you.” Her blue hair wafted lightly when she shook her head. She probably should talk to somebody, but not to Rachel, not her. They recreated themselves from those ruins once, she didn’t want to risk a reconstruction again.

“Load?” A whisper and a kiss on her palm. “You are mine, Chloe Price, with all the sweet and bitter loads of yours. And we have to deal with it. Somehow.” A sigh. “Please.”

“Yeah, like fucking therapy.” Chloe sighed too and then smiled at her memories unexpectedly. Rachel had to think about the same thing, so despite of the circumstances and heavy tension, she tapped her thighs and started with a playful tone:

“That reminds me of something. C’mon, Miss Price. Lay your beautiful head on my lap, knock yourself down and tell me everything.” She really didn’t want to flirt, but the last part of the sentence sounded alluring. Tempting. Damn.

Chloe obeyed, setting herself up exactly as instructed. She took off her wet beanie, ruffled the blue locks and made herself comfortable, kicking a few empty beer bottles by accident. It helped to break the ice, crack the surface of intensity, make them playful again.

“All right, doctor Amber. Where to start… I have this girl. She’s beautiful, she’s smart and she’s good to me.”

Rachel gave her a careful, therapist’s look. “Are you sure you still hate country music?”

“Shut up, doctor shitty-therapist.” She ran out of smokes, so her girl had to feed her with her own cigarette. “My girl is perfect, alright? But one time, actually more than one time she slipped and started to fuck this guy I considered almost like a friend or something. An ally.”

The smoke was taken away from her lips and she could see Rachel inhaling deeply. Sharing a cigarette was more like a ritual, a physical bonding.

“She doesn’t sound so perfect then.” Her therapist stated.

“Imperfection goes well with her complexion, but hear me out.” Chloe was more eager to talk than she would expect. Maybe she was carrying this burden for so long, maybe she was feeling obligated by Rachel’s honesty or maybe the wound was still so big and painful she couldn’t stop but bleed out. “I forgot about the whole fucking thing, but this common friend of mine is still around, and some things remind me of him or even them. Like places they’ve been together, the fucking RV.” Fuck, she sounded like a little kid. Get a grip, Price. “It’s bothering me… a little, sometimes a lot, like fucking hell. It was way worse, now I can manage, but still… Some days are better. Sometimes I totally fucking forget.” Was it the rain or were those tears on her cheek, under her eyelids? “I trust you, I love you but those things in my head… These thoughts… It’s like a fucking disease, eating me from the inside. He was touching my girl, fucking her and I didn’t know, I didn’t do shit.” She’s gonna sob once and then stop. All right, twice. Fine, one more and that’s it.

“If I could only reverse time…” Her therapist was delusional. Great.

“I keep killing myself over with this… cancer. I wanted to be strong, I thought I would work it out alone, but I’m slowly getting out of options.” The first sobbing was bad, but a helpless cry was even worse. “I know she’s mine and she will be, I trust her. I want to spend my life with her. Maybe I really need some kind of closure I guess, or confirmation. I don’t know. So yeah. That’s how I feel.”

Silence tasted like tears and disappointment. The only sound breaking in was the inhale and exhale,
breathing in and out, and the ash being tapped out.

“It’s stupid.” Chloe offered a summary.

“No, it’s not, baby.” The lit-up cigarette moved from the lips to the air of the falling day. The darkness would eat them again pretty soon.

“So, what should I do?”

“It’s a hard one, Chloe. You might never get rid of those thoughts.” Rachel’s voice was distant, as she wanted to detach herself from all of it, but quickly changed her tune into a passionate one, just with a small twitch. “If I was walking in your shoes... If I was the one who had to deal with it... I would fucking cry my eyes out every day, because somebody else dared to touch you. I almost went crazy, because of one stupid kiss with Max.”

Rachel was getting angry and furious, to her own surprise. The rage, usually asleep under the soft undertones, lifted its head again. She had a very vivid imagination and putting herself in Chloe’s place, empathizing with the situation, was making her blood boil.

“It was more than one.” Chloe was helpful as usual to tame her anger. Not. “Wait, was it really bothering you?”

“Yeah, well you got me.” Her girlfriend wasn’t smiling, lying nor pretending. Chloe, still absorbed with her own thorny issue, blinked a few times truly stunned.

“Are you jealous of me?” She asked with a pure surprise.

Rachel wanted to howl. One day she would strangle Chloe Price. She would rip apart her cluelessness, this blue ignorance and wipe out this astonishingly questioning gaze. How didn’t she get it still?

“Of course, I’m jealous, you dork. How couldn’t I be?” Rachel’s smoke blew out feverishly. “I’m jealous, and greedy, and selfish. I want you only for myself. I know it’s scary and weird, but that’s who I am.”

Chloe really wanted to force her to hear more, to feel the rage Rachel felt. She knew her girlfriend was possessive, but the anger concerned her and turned her on at the same time. She was wanted more than she ever thought she would be. It was still a revelation, after all those years.

They couldn’t waste this chance for reconsolidation and Chloe gave up and got back to the most painful topic on the planet.

“What were you thinking?” Her voice was tender and soft.

Rachel narrowed her eyes, ungainly switching gears of her own thoughts. It took her a good minute to understand what her girlfriend was asking for.

“Then? With him? Oh...” It was an evasion. “I didn’t think much. If I did, we wouldn’t have to talk now....”

“Really?” Chloe’s scoff was more than doubtful.

“Oh, all right.” Rachel’s tone filled with a dose of annoyance, but then the respect to the subject and to her girl took over. “First, I was just shocked it was happening and then the guilt came. And then the regret and the fact that I don’t deserve anything else so I might at least, well... enjoy what I put
myself into. I couldn’t enjoy it much, because I missed you. So yeah… there you are.”

It was a hella ride to go through those emotions again, to recall them, finding, describing, putting them in order. Why did she even decide to get involved with Frank? Why did she let it get that far? Because he was Chloe’s friend? Because he was an ally, like her girlfriend stated? She could seduce most of the male population of Arcadia Bay, why did she decide to go with Frank, for fuck’s sake?

Because in an absurdly twisted way, he reminded her of Chloe?

A few scarier, yet simple conclusions appeared on the horizon of her mind. She didn’t want to go there, not yet. One day she would analyze everything, summarize and put it to rest. This wasn’t a good moment. Or was it?

Chloe was merciless, fucking reading her mind again. She cleaned her throat drowning into the most awkward angle of this issue, the one that was bothering her more than any other. It was stupid, but she let herself be stupid today. Because… reasons, and why the hell not.

“But you’ve never slept with a guy before.” She stated simply.

“No, I haven’t.”

The direction was changing. Dangerously.

“So…” Chloe was looking at her dirty fingers, still with garage grease underneath the nails. She stumbled on the words again, tried breathing, didn’t work, tried again “So, technically he was your first.”

“No,” Rachel was still allegedly calm. “Technically you were my first.”

“I’m talking about the other technique.”

“That’s what’s bothering you?” They looked at each other again. One question and one irritation.

“Yeah.” How could you not love the simplicity of Chloe’s questions and answers. “Wouldn’t it bother you?”

“As fuck.” Rachel closed her eyes. It was perturbing her for years and she didn’t shy away from asking Chloe difficult questions about her boy-toy phase, grilling her harshly with jokes and suggestions and hiding her own insecurities. It was more than just curiosity, they both knew it. She couldn’t blame her girlfriend for being thirsty for details, even the painful ones. The good thing was, there were none. “Very well… You’ve taken every single virginity of mine that you could have, Price. Really. It was nothing for him to take over and nothing I would let him take.” Her girlfriend seemed to forget they had been together for over 3 years now, and damn, it was always passionate and filled with experiments.

Chloe didn’t expect it, but she would get more. Rachel focused one more time, clenching her fists and struggling with her own fears to add another, probably the most humiliating layer to the story. She wasn’t even sure if it was true. She couldn’t be that shallow and that disgraceful. Or could she?

“But technicalities aside…” She was speaking slowly, feeling the weight of the words. “Maybe I wanted to try what it was like to be with a guy. Maybe that’s why I put up with it for so long.” She brushed off the blue hair from Chloe’s forehead, stroking her eyebrows, feeling her skin under fingertips.

“To feel… straight?” Chloe and the reoccurring topic of being gay. The demand of a label on your
forehead and in your pants.

“No...” She denied. “Yeah...” Yet again. “I don’t know. That’s super stupid though. How straight can you be banging a drug dealer?”

“For a lot of people, it’s way more normal than this.” Chloe was subjecting herself to her touch with a lazy semi-smile on her lips. It didn’t stop her from asking cringe questions though.

“Like me and you? Please.” Rachel shook her head, still amazed at how beautiful her girl was, still tracing her features with her fingertips. She even forgot to smoke.

“That’s fucking true.” Chloe shrugged. “And I’m not saying it as a social delinquent.”

Rachel just smirked lightly, with the most genuine smile on her lips.

“I learned something today. From Steph.” Her fingertips were moving unconsciously tracing the same lines.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. We chatted a bit at the dinner. She taught me a lesson.” Damn you, Chloe… you are so damn gorgeous, she couldn’t focus. “I want to spend my life with you. Yeah, it’s true, stop grinning like an idiot.” She was grinning too. “Oh fuck, all right, you can grin, just don’t tickle me. Since we’re planning our life together… It also means that I’m gonna be gay for the rest of my amazing existence. What gives?”

“You’re not gay.” Chloe frowned.

“To be perfectly honest, maybe I am after all.”

“Rachel Amber, what the fuck?” Her girlfriend sat back and looked at her with a huge disbelief. “Three years of denying went to shit?”

“Baby, I don’t care, alright?” Rachel combed her semi-wet hair with her fingers. “I made a terrible mistake, maybe because I was trying to prove something. Yes, he fucked me. Yes, he did it more than once, but it was nothing compared to what we have. What I feel with you. When we fuck, make love or even kiss, it’s like the whole damn universe is wrapping around us in fire. When he fucked me, it was like a boy scout trying and trying and trying to start a fucking campfire with his wooden stick. Sometimes it kind of happened, but it was just like a shit spark, ok? Aaaand I’m getting too fucking descriptive.” She blushed, smiling and embarrassed at the same time.

“It’s actually a divine description, please continue.” Her girlfriend’s eyebrows rose as much as her interest in the details.

“A witty girl, this one.” She hit Chloe’s arm lightly, just to hide her uneasiness again. But then the rage woke up again, imagination stretched and put itself to work. “You know what scares me though?”

“What?”

“If you cheated on me with him…” Rachel’s eyes grew dark. “I would probably kill Frank Bowers. With my bare hands. If he ever touched you, with your permission or not, I would fucking rip his heart out with a fucking spoon. Or steal a gun from your step-dad’s locker and shoot him dead. Not because he hurt me or he is a bad guy, he is just... Frank. But because I wouldn’t be able to stand the fact that he was there with you as close as only I can be.” It was fucking scary seeing her demons
take control over reason and judgment. “He was there and he got away with it.”

Chloe was watching her with wide-opened eyes and her mouth half open. It was fucking grim and scary. If she would be a serial killer, it might even be alluring, but she wasn’t, thank god, not really planning on it. She kept forgetting again and again how fierce her girlfriend could be, how passionate and dangerous at the same time.

“What? Too dark?”

“Amber, stop imagining things.” She growled. “You’re projecting.”

“I would fucking kill him and I’m dead serious.” Rachel looked at her with burning eyes. She was so furious that her vision got blurred and she couldn’t see straight.

Chloe looked terrified. She was terrified, watching her girlfriend with in a horrid awe. She wished so many times that Rachel would be the one to deal with the issue, not her. Now she understood how terrible this idea would be. Damn you, Rachel Amber. Damn you and your possessive, sick, sweet love.

Chloe rolled her eyes and stood up.

“You are a terrible therapist.”

“You never checked my license.” Rachel also got up, quite confused by her own reaction. Joking helped with the awkwardness of the situation, but she was still angry.

“I like illegal.” Chloe pulled her close, brushing her nose with hers. She had to tame this fury somehow and tenderness was pretty useful, as she had learned through their common journey. “Don’t worry, last time I took your therapy advice into consideration I almost killed myself driving off a cliff. So no, thank you. And I won’t kill Frank.” She sniffed. “I guess.”

“You guess?” Now it was time for Rachel to get scared. Chloe took a step back, sending her a devilish smile and putting her hands in her jeans’ pockets, wondering for a moment.

“I considered it for like a month or two, but it’s just not worth it. I don’t really think it would be nice to spend the rest of my life in a high security prison. I have other plans.”

“Thank God.” Rachel sighed with relief. She pushed this whole revenge thing way too far, and her rebellious, punk girlfriend was the one who had to tame it. Chloe just extinguished the fire so easily that the whole Oregon fire department could learn from her and worship her life skills, damn it.

They both reached for each other at the same moment. Their hands meet in an understanding grasp as they slowly started walking to the nearby parked truck. It was time to get home, before somebody would start another wildfire or burn down a particular RV.

“I wouldn’t worry about the prison thing that much. I’m the daughter of the DA after all.” Rachel added nonchalantly, and it was punished with a nip to her ear. She giggled and purred, tugging her girl to the truck through mud and sludge.

It was still raining, pouring actually. They didn’t mind at all, both thinking about a hot shower and the warm blankets after. It was romantic after all, just get draining wet together in the middle of an abandoned junkyard. Just like the good old days.

“Speaking of the devil.” Rachel recalled just before they opened the car’s door. “My father got back to me like an hour ago.”
“All right, and?” Chloe didn’t have high hopes about her education being continued, so was prepared for the worst anyway. Little did she know.

“It’s done and official.” Rachel opened her hands in a welcoming gesture. “Now you have to drag your ass to Blackwell and sign up some papers. In my charming company, of course.” And she jumped on her seat.

The truck smelled like home, felt like home, even if it didn’t have a single seatbelt and no insurance. Their definition of home was quite similar.

“Really?” Chloe followed and found herself being pulled closer again. Oh wow, what a kiss she got. Unexpected, fast, but Rachel wouldn’t let Chloe to sneak out now. She needed her kisses now.

“We got in?” It was hard to talk, feeling Rachel lips on hers. “My mother will build you… a fucking Monument.” And then the neck. She loved her kisses and bites on the neck. “Rach…”

“Shut up for a moment. Please.” She heard a possessive whisper.

For a moment. Good joke. They had to stop before it was too late. Barely managed.

“Baby?” Rachel asked, when the engine howled with black smoke about to take off. The tires were ripping the damp ground, prepared for a bumpy ride back.

“Yeah?” Chloe’s eyes were sparkling again and it was hard not to provoke, not to seduce her again into another kiss and even more. Rachel was trying to be serious and thoughtful though, so she bit her lip and turned her head away from the blue-haired temptation.

“Are you feeling better now? Or did I make it worse?” Her heart was beating fast, while waiting for the answer. Maybe she went too far with this honesty, opened-up just a tad too much.

“Yeah, it helped a lot. Especially the description.” Chloe shook her head, knowing she would never be able to look at Frank the same way again. Not that she wanted to see his face ever again.

“Thanks. I just needed to talk about it. And, Rach?”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t kill Max, ok? I know we just kissed, and there were no boy scouts or wooden sticks involved, but please…”

They both giggled.

“I will try.” Her beautiful girlfriend watched her for a moment, narrowing her eyes and reaching her thigh. Chloe gasped, wondering how the hell they would get back home. The promise sounded convincing though, but the noise of the thunder’s strike added a sinister touch to Rachel’s words, begging Chloe not to trust them.
It was her birthday. July 22nd. Monday. 2 missed calls, 27 notifications, 8 text messages.

Rachel woke up in a surprisingly good mood. It changed promptly when she noticed the other half of the bed was already cold and empty. It was rare for her to be the last one to get up, but the previous night was pretty intense and she had probably drifted into her dreams around sunrise. Not her fault though, she was just getting early birthday wishes, delivered and given back to one particular beautiful girl. The girl that wasn’t there though, disappeared like a fucking morning breeze or ominous dream. Unusual. It required an investigation about how Chloe managed to get up before noon and hadn’t woken her up by slamming her dresser’s drawers.

She didn’t like to be left between the sheets and blankets alone, getting used to open her eyes by Chloe’s side, even being annoyed by her light snoring or quiet sniffling. Rachel had forgotten what it was like to spend a night all by herself in her own bed and wouldn’t mind not to be recalled of it.

Damn, she was possessive.

The last three weeks had gone pretty fast. Chloe was busy with her little garage project, always covered with grease, paint, oil and sweat. Her adventures costed her a few cuts, lots of cursing and two big arguments with David, breaking things included. Rachel supported this madness, even if she wasn’t sure why Chloe insisted so much on keeping it going. She loved fixing cars, alright, but there were a lot of other places and possibilities to practice this hobby, without additional distress. On the other hand, the family was making an extra income on renovating those wrecks, not much though, usually enough to buy another dead-beat beast, some ridiculously expensive tools and parts, and for some smokes, beer and small shopping. Rachel was also taking advantage of this source of cash, so she had to stay put. She missed her girlfriend though, even if it felt good to spend some time alone or finally hook up with estranged friends. She managed to hang out with Steph a few times, contacted a few other Blackwell students she hadn’t been in touch with for months, preparing for her social comeback. Chloe couldn’t take part in this development since she was too busy and Rachel started to complain. Then vent. And then she got angry.

Did she mention, how possessive she became over one particular blue-haired beauty?

Rachel decided to stay in bed for a moment longer, going through her phone and social media, abandoned for months now. Some people she barely knew wished her everything she wanted, attaching cute puppies, little kittens, colorful balloons and digital, gluten-free cakes, but the closest friends and enemies sent the texts. Let’s see.

Steph remembered, of course. She dropped some hints about a big surprise and wink, wink, smile, smile. Interesting. One from Max, something formal and cookie-cutter, but maybe it was just a courtesy at this point. They still didn’t know each other that well. Victoria remembered about her also, probably practicing for another season of “Competition and Drama, Blackwell edition.” Nathan Prescott sent two. One was a cute “Die bitch, die”, the other – “I’m sorry, have a nice day.” He really should seek some help. One was from Chloe. Dork. “I love you, sunshine.” She loved her too much. And then one from Frank. She deleted it without reading, wondering if she should tell Chloe about it. It felt so good not to touch this ex-boyfriend and ex-cheater thing for quite a while.

They were healing, Chloe was healing. Everything had been going so well. Would that matter? Should she ruin their mood today? He would always try to contact her, unless he was going to find another girlfriend, but Rachel doubted that. She couldn’t imagine a lineup of candidates in front of
his RV.

One unanswered call was from her father, the other from her estranged grandma. That was it.

She remembered the glory days, when she had been flooded with messages, flowers, cards and gifts every time this day of the year had come. Popularity didn’t bring her happiness or delight though, but it was addicting in some strange way. Fuck popularity.

She heard fast pacing steps. At last.

Chloe stormed into the room and stopped rapidly seeing her girlfriend was already awake. A huge happy smile lit up her face, radiating the whole room at the same time. Rachel sniffled, hiding her sheepish gaze. This summer she had overcome a lot of fears and became way more aware of certain things. Like Chloe. For example.

Her girlfriend was incredibly sexy and gorgeous, but most importantly she had no idea about it. She wasn’t that shy 16-year-old who Rachel seduced on a South Pacific train, even if she acted like it from time to time. She wasn’t just a cute little dork, not anymore. Chloe became a confident, amazingly beautiful, stunning woman, and Rachel got scared and turned on every time she looked at her. Scared, because she grew even more possessive, thinking about sharing this gem’s attention with other people at the school, from students to teachers. And turned on because.... Well, just look at her.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” Rachel stretched, hiding her bashfulness and greeted her with a lazy grin, covering the pillows with her tangled, golden mane.

“My cat is dead. Happy birthday to you.” Only Chloe Price would put those two sentences together so nonchalantly. The sassy attitude got spiced up with an excitement today. There was something really special coming Rachel’s way, something that would hit her hard. She had only one wish at the moment, maybe one wish in general, and it already came true, slamming the door and walking in a second ago.

Was she always conscious of how amazing Chloe was? It was fucking startling, even now, after all those years.

“Unique, intriguingly dark and impressive as always.” Rachel summoned her to the bed with an extremely seductive gesture of one single finger. Chloe breathed in through grinned teeth, wiping out her smile entirely and followed. A slow, passionate kiss made her strive for more. As usual. “Any plans for today?”

“I should ask you, it’s your birthday.” Rachel still smelled like last night. “But I have a few surprises.”

The kiss was taking too long. Chloe bit her girl’s lower lip, tugging it a little, then crashed on Rachel’s lips hard, just to make her pay the price with a soft moan. The moan came, Chloe also almost came, almost is the key word here, fuck, it wasn’t going into the direction she planned.

“What kind of surprises?” Her girlfriend’s curiosity took over her eagerness and anticipation.

The air cooled down a little bit. Chloe was able to finally break off from Rachel’s arms and stand up. She wouldn’t mind spending the whole day, even eternity, here, but she had a hidden agenda carefully organized and waiting to be executed.

“That’s why it’s called a surprise Rach, I’m not sure if you’re familiar with the idea. It’s something you don’t expect to happen or get. But first you will have to hella trust me. Really trust me, because this time...” That will make her crazy, and Chloe knew it. “…I’m gonna blindfold you.”
Rachel smile didn’t help. Covering her shyness and insecurity behind a tempting gaze, she growled quietly. She lowered her head, looking like a cat that cornered a mouse and was about to rip it apart. Except the ripping part thing would include Chloe’s clothes. Mostly.

“Any more details?”

“Alright, hint.” Chloe coughed and cleaned her throat, dragging out a simple black band from her jeans’ pocket. “When you get ready, like dressed up and stuff, I’m gonna fucking blindfold you here and lead you downstairs.” She stated firmly, showing how thoughtful she was.

Rachel blinked. Chloe was serious. She was holding a piece of black fabric with a severe intention of covering her sight. It was an exciting idea to put it kindly, but the strategy itself seemed concerning.

“Does the surprise include me being un-blindfolded after?” If Chloe expected to catch Rachel off-guard though, she couldn’t be more mistaken.

“Well, yeah. Eventually.” The blue-haired surprise shrugged and licked her chapped lips. She should’ve predicted that the morning would lead to more than just a welcome kiss. They celebrated Rachel’s birthday before and the memories always made her shiver a little bit. Besides… Well, just look at her.

“What if I don’t want to?” Rachel was looking at those lips. It wasn’t good. She looked at them so intensely, that Chloe could feel her kisses and bites already.

“You will have to, otherwise other… ummm… activities, won’t be possible.” She barely managed to survive the temptation.

So, Chloe was preparing something big, something she was proud of. It wasn’t that startling, but the fact that the whole family was still at home and it was already late morning made Rachel pleasantly suspicious and a tad nervous at the same time. She tilted her head wondering what awaited her downstairs. Her curiosity was still fighting with the desire, and the blonde trapped in between was losing this battle either way.

“The one I have in mind would be more than manageable.” She bit her lip so hard, that almost cut the skin.

“Rach, do you always have to…” Chloe shook her head being guilty of the same temptation. Her breath was shallow, short, filled with unexpressed whimper.

Rachel crawled forward, not even hiding her lack of any underwear, kneeled on the bed, just in front of her girl, still tempting, seducing and purring. Physically purring. Her fingers brushed Chloe’s belly and started to play with the belt buckle, just about to untangle it. She tugged her girl closer with one single move, showing how much she really wanted her. Now. Here. Permanently.

A soft moan escaped Chloe’s mouth. She didn’t notice, didn’t hear, still resisting, but giving up unintentionally. She had given up three years ago anyway.

“It’s my birthday. My last teenage birthday to be exact, let me have my…” Rachel looked into her eyes from the line of her belt, lifting her white shirt and exposing the bare skin. “…fun.”

“You will have fun. Hopefully.” Chloe was determined to take a stand, break off, make her stop, put her hands away from her waist, but tangled her fingers in Rachel’s uncombed hair instead, pulling closer, in a subconscious demand. “Depends on what you expect…” She gasped, still trying to stick to the original plan.
“Well, you.” First it was a one small loving kiss, and then the next one followed. Then many more. On her abdomen and going lover. The warm lips, still tasting like last sinister night, the tongue dancing around her belly button, promising a different dance below the line of her underwear.

One moan too far and Chloe dragged her closer, hard, harder, possessively and demanding. Rachel responded with a groan, thrilled and aroused. Chloe lost her vision to blurriness and hot breath of her girlfriend on the bare skin. Control was such a foreign term, she forgot the meaning behind it.

She heard the pants being unzipped. That sobered her up for a second.

“That’s a given, what else.” She smirked seeing the blonde’s head going lower. Pulling her hair was supposed to be a quiet warning, but it only made it worse. Rachel moved her hips in a quiet leap, kissing frantically and licking, scratching her sides lightly, reaching the line of her boxers. It was just enough to make Chloe unreasonably insane. And damn, she was supposed to be a fucking reasonable adult today. Fuck.

“I mean you.” Rachel mumbled, baffled at how she couldn’t keep up with her teasing, losing her game completely and becoming obsessed to have her again.

“Lowering your expectations?” Chloe looked at her from above, brushing her cheek, sliding her hand to her chin and lifting it up, breaking the kisses and looked into the burning eyes, trying to be calm, focused and cold, as cold as she could be. Pretending she didn’t want her now was almost impossible, but she had more than one reason to turn her down.

It was probably the hottest and most alluring thing that Rachel Amber experienced in her whole life. The hazel eyes were sparkling, just like last night. Her panting was fast, uneven, burning invisible marks on Chloe’s skin. Her fingers were tightened on the unbuckled belt like it was the last straw keeping her from falling down.

Pretending she didn’t want Rachel Amber fired her girlfriend up even more. Who would’ve thought that a rejection could be so attractive.

“On the contrary.” Rachel’s voice was husky, breathless, broken and very raspy. “They’ve never been so high.”

They watched each other for a moment, frozen in time, wanting with a pure, raw passion. One move, one gesture or one kiss away from forgetting about the word outside.

The blue-haired desire took Rachel’s hands off her waist, bent over to kiss her one more time and took a few steps back, just to be safe. She was breathing heavily, while zipping up her pants, knowing that obligations would have to prevail. This morning was too important to get lost in her arms again. Chloe grasped for air, trying to clear her head. Her parents and a blindfold at the same time. Why the fuck did she think it was a good combination to begin with?

Rachel rose her eyebrow in a gentle surprise, still terribly unsatisfied. So that’s how will we play today?

“All right, take a shower, a cold one maybe, dress up and I’m gonna take you down.” Chloe hated herself so much for breaking the eye contact, but couldn’t bear it any longer. It was a humiliating way to start a day, but there was no other option. Not today anyway. Rachel would appreciate it later. Hopefully.

“Now you’re speaking my language, Price.” She heard just before she locked the hungry cat in her bedroom. A cat, who was barely putting herself together. “Please, never stop.”
Chloe found David in the living room, wiping his hands in one of Joyce’s favorite kitchen towels. They would argue about it later, especially if she would find a single smudge of grease on it. He didn’t care apparently, smirking with pure self-satisfaction and pride. He elbowed her with an unspoken understanding, and Chloe could swear his pride was shared with her. It was their work, their opus magnum, the most important one so far. The new beginning in so many ways.

“Is everything ready?” She asked, returning the fist-bump. Her breath was still short, but he was blaming the excitement and exhilaration. At least she hoped he would read it that way.

David tapped her arm, encouraging and supporting, then winked. She could kill him for it, but there was no time for a well-planned murder.

“Adding the last few touches to it. Excited?”

“As fuck…” Chloe shook her head, still too thrilled to stop moving around. Then she rapidly stopped and looked at her step-father. “I... haven’t told you how grateful I am.” She mumbled, scared by her own ignorance. Those few weeks were harsh for both of them, he got furious a few times, but never complained.

Through those preparations she discovered how sweet he could be, only if she was nice to him. When she started to be mean and challenging, he also made a mental U-turn, changing into a step-Nazi again, a merciless sergeant and the biggest asshole in the universe. She slowly learned how to play this game, but it didn’t come easily.

“It was a pleasure to prepare it with you, soldier.” David nodded fast, just like jarheads do.” You did well. You deserve it.”

So many military jokes came to her mind, but for once she decided to drop them. She was grateful indeed. The surprise wouldn’t be possible without his aid and assistance.

“But the money thing…” Chloe mumbled shyly, like a kid asking for ice cream cash. “It costed a small fortune.”

“Not that much, really. We had resources from before, remember? You will pay me back on the next project. With your hard work.” David smiled. For the very first time he really smiled. It was fucking scary.

“Yes, sir.” She saluted, and he laughed out loud. Military jokes aren’t always bad after all. “I will, sir!” She repeated, but the impact was way smaller this time.

David looked at her, as if thinking about something intensely. Then he made a step in her direction, opening his arms and waiting for a hug. Chloe couldn’t. Not now. Not today. She shook her head, an apologetic grimace twitched her lips for a moment.

He understood, backed off and made the well-known gesture. Fingers to the eyes and back to her.

“I’m watching you Chloe.” This time it sounded almost reassuring.

Rachel was still in the shower, so Chloe had maybe five minutes. Or an hour, depending on circumstances, but if it was a cold bath, she had to race with time. She checked if everything was
prepared outside, inhaled, exhaled, inhaled again and ran upstairs to check on Joyce.

Why did she have to organize everything and herd the whole family like a flock of sheep? They were adults and should know what to do during such an important ceremony, right?

“Mom, we’re almost ready, can you come?”

Joyce, who took this morning off only because her daughter begged her for it for almost half a week, got up from her bed and looked into those happy, blue, puppy eyes.

“Chloe, can I talk to you for a minute?” She demanded, asking gently.

“What now?” Chloe rolled her eyes, but closed the door politely and walked to her mother. She could sense trouble or a severe talk coming though. Those things tended to happen always when she was thrilled and prepared for the best moments of her life. Always. Was that her luck or Joyce’s sense of humor?

“Be nice.” Her mother scoffed, then straightened and added softly but firmly: “I know what you’re doing, you and Rachel, and I’m really happy for you. Both of you.”

“Is this the right time and place to talk about this, mom?” The impatience in Chloe’s movements was screaming volumes. Joyce’s daughter couldn’t stand, sit or even walk. Buzzed with eagerness, she was barely listening. Her mother needed her to listen though. Even if the words might be harsh and unforeseen.

“Maybe not, but I have to say it anyway.” She stated with a confrontational tone. “I just want you to think about it, Chloe. I know what you’re doing, what you’re both doing, but it escalates too quickly. Three months ago, you were barely talking to each other, now everything is in full swing again. I’m happy for you… and for Rachel, but maybe you should slow down a little.”

Slowing down in general was as possible as the eruption of a volcano in the middle of sleepy Arcadia Bay. Slowing down right now would be a horrid torture. Joyce knew it was the wrong time and place, not to mention Chloe was almost going insane, but she had to share. She had to be honest. She expected a detonation of anger, vexation or wrath, but Chloe just shifted her arms nervously. She had been thinking about similar possibilities, feeding her fears and insecurities, but right now it was too late. She was listening, she paid attention. Joyce smiled without joy.

“Why mom?” Chloe turned around, trying to avoid her sight. “Aren’t you supposed to take what life offers you?”

Joyce closed her in a short embrace, trying to calm her down, support her, make her safe. She had been trying for years and years, hoping to get to her, to understand, to help and comfort. This was a road full of failures and errors, but Joyce never stopped trying.

“Because I don’t want you to be hurt Chloe. I just don’t want you to suffer, if something goes wrong. Not that it will, I’m just saying.”

Chloe took a step back and her eyes sparkled. She missed her mom, she missed the simple honesty and unconditional trust, but it all had been lost so many times along the way. The connection hadn’t been destroyed though, but damaged to a severe extent. Her mother wanted to be there for her, playing with the wickedest of the scenarios, preparing for the worst and hoping for the best. That’s what’s mothers do after all.

“It won’t mom. I trust her.” She did trust Rachel. She trusted her girl with every fiber of her being,
with everything she had. Or tried to trust. Was it too much? Probably, but Chloe couldn’t just give a small snippet of her love. She had to offer herself completely, entirely and exclusively.

It had been the best choice in her life so far.

“I would like to trust Rachel too...” Joyce sighed. “...But please, just be careful.”


Chloe had her doubts, she was feeding her undying fears on them. She tamed those scary monsters inside her head and would feel naked if someone would exterminate them completely. Sometimes she had to feel insecure, just to be assured by her blond girlfriend of the better world, of the unwritten amazing fate. Doubts were good, if dosed properly.

The uncomfortable silence had to be broken off, and her daughter knew only one way to do it. Instead of any civil human way of contact or bonding, she decided to crack a joke.

“Oh, we are mom, we are.” A devilish grin flashed on her daughter’s lips again. “You don’t have to be afraid of us becoming a five in this household.”

“Chloe!” Joyce rolled her eyes, when her bedroom door slammed behind her beloved and troubling daughter.

She hoped, she hoped so much that Rachel would be the one and only partner, lover and best friend for Chloe. Just for her daughter’s sake.

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“One more step.” The caring tone in Chloe’s voice and a firm grasp of her hand on Rachel’s waist was extremely helpful during this awkward operation. She got blinded in their room, which was supposedly a safe option, since the whole procedure was damn fucking hot, but walking down the stairs was a pure torture. If Chloe wasn’t that protective and that strong, they would both fall on their faces in the biggest surprise of the year. Step by step, they overcame the staircase and now Rachel was taken outside—at least that’s what she assumed. She had been living in this house permanently for over 3 months, spent over 3 years back and forth and always thought the distance between Chloe’s room and the entrance door could be counted in a few jumps. Now, the Price-Madsen residency felt like a complicated, dark mansion built with twisted and long hallways in which she would wander around forever to find her way out.

“Are we there yet?” Rachel was already feeling the soft morning zephyr, hearing the small Arcadia Bay traffic in the background, warmed up with the sunrays. Thankfully it wasn’t raining today, but the ground still smelled like storm and burnt thunder.

“Be careful, there is a doorstep.” Chloe squeezed her arm, guiding her gently “Good. Good girl.”

“Are we there yet?” She repeated just for fun, not complaining by any means.

“I would’ve never thought you would be so excited to take it off.” Chloe scoffed, but she was even more thrilled and enthusiastic than Rachel imagined. What did this blue-devil have planned? Hopefully it didn’t require sitting on the wet grass, because she had just changed into her new, white pants.

“Trust me, I’m not.”
Rachel used her imagination, exploring the possibilities with the blindfold on. There were many and most of them required getting back to the bedroom or any other non-public place. Her imagination was extensively vivid, so it included also many unsafe and unusual locations. She smiled at her thoughts.

Chloe also giggled, holding her tight.

“Stop with the sultry jokes. My parents are around.”

The grasp on her arm and waist was released and she was let go. Chloe stood behind and untied the freaking blinding thing. Rachel had to squint her eyes, when her sight got blurred by the morning light. She shook her head, like a prisoner on his first walk and looked around. Joyce and David stood by her side. He was smiling proudly. She was carefully reserved. Chloe got back into the picture quickly, covering her unintentionally from the morbid sunlight.

“Aaaand… What do you think?”

Think about what? Rachel looked around again, confused and puzzled. There was nothing to look at to be honest. Was it one of the famous Chloe’s pranks? Nah, David wouldn’t be so fond of it, and Joyce wouldn’t change to a different shift just to make fun of her. There was a fucking sweet looking vintage sports car on her right side, but.

Wait a moment. Rachel’s heart sank down to her stomach, and then jumped to her throat. She didn’t. They didn’t. She had to take a step back. Chloe just nodded, confirming the unspoken question. Rachel shook in response, needing to sit down. Now. Grasping for support, she reached to Chloe and her girlfriend delivered a helpful arm.

“Tell me you’re joking.”

“Nope.” Chloe proudly tapped the red vintage mustang, born in 1971, trashed and then resurrected by the famous Price-Madsen tandem during a fierce battle under the doomed garage, 2013. It was a piece of trash when they brought it home. Rachel remembered the poor worn-down creature, but it looked almost like anew now.

She dared to touch the red car paint, now waxed and polished, then traced the shape of the hood, knowing how much of a toil of sweat and tears it took to rebuild the perfect line. She looked at Chloe, watching her, not believing, becoming one shaken question mark. Her parents had everything, the Madsens barely managed and they wanted to give her this? How? Why?

She didn’t deserve it. A fact. Full stop. She wasn’t humble. It was just simply too much.

Rachel knew how much it cost, not financially, but she knew how many sleepless nights, frustrations and fights had to be given to complete the task. She had been there the whole time, she remembered her own complaint about Chloe getting back to bed too late, too tired and too exasperated to do anything else but snore. David was almost going backwards, tired after another night between an engine and a steering wheel and a boring watch at Blackwell grounds.

And they went through this for her?

No one had ever sacrificed nor cared that much before. And she was whining all the fucking time.

“Happy birthday, Rachel.” Chloe offered her a very needed hug. She accepted, still speechless, looking at David, Joyce, Chloe, David again, this car. Fuck. Chloe was keeping her close, tightly and affectionately. Rachel could hear her heartbeat, sped up with tension and pride.
“How did you...?”

“David found this thing beat-up and abandoned, we worked on it together, as you remember.” Chloe shrugged nonchalantly, but she was far away from being dispassionate. “It required an engine refresh, hella rust scraping, not to mention the renovation of the dashboard, stitches and shit. The transmission was the worst though, it will give me nightmares for the rest of my fucking life. Everything was in a pretty good shape overall, somebody just didn’t know how to care for this baby, and left it to rot. We brought it back to the world. For you. And since you never dragged your ass down to the garage, it became a surprise. So... it’s from all of us, actually. As the new beginning of the rest of your life.”

Rachel Amber, the queen of socializing and good behavior got completely taken off guard. She just stood there with her mouth open, jaw dropped, looking at them, back and forth and barely touching her birthday gift. She missed all the technical details as usual, but appreciated every extortion, or would appreciate later. Right now, she forgot how to react in general to anything. The dumbstruck girl was adorable and cute though, met with contentment from the whole family.

Somebody had to stop it for fuck’s sake.

“We are proud of you, Rachel.” David offered her another hug and Chloe gladly stepped aside. They exchanged looks, both content and satisfied. The only thing Rachel could say was a thank you, some formula she had barely remembered and repeated so many times getting some not important things that no one wanted to give and receive. It was not enough. Not even close.

Joyce was also waiting with her arms open.

“You did good, kid. Happy birthday.” She hugged Rachel closely, longer, more profoundly. Did she suggest that it was a reward? For kicking off the addiction or getting back to Chloe? Or maybe the school thing was in play.

She was analyzing it too much.

“I... I don’t know what to say...” When the line of hugs and warm embraces had ended, everybody expected her to say something yet again. “I can’t find any words, to describe what I’m feeling right now and how grateful I am... I just... thank you.”

She really shouldn’t accept it, but rejecting it would be an insult. She was trapped, no way out. Damn you, Chloe.

They all burst in this pleasant, united, common family laugh, and since she felt a part of it—of them —she laughed too. Still overwhelmed, she barely remembered Joyce saying her goodbyes and getting into her car, ready to leave for work. David was next, saying something important, maybe nice, maybe sweet, and then he followed his wife, gallantly offering her a drive to the diner today.

Chloe stayed.

“Can I kiss you now?” At this point she was not asking. She was begging.

“No, because I know the kiss you’re planning. And I’m not ready for a make out session in front of my parents, sorry.”

“Can I hold you at least?” Rachel lowered her head and sniffled once. The only response was the grasp from the blue arms. The world had a meaning again, started getting back to its shape.

“Maybe you should blindfold me again, so no one would see my crying and shit.” She hated to cry,
fuck, she shouldn’t cry. Chloe was rocking her in her arms, entirely baffled and damn happy. Well, if she wanted to make her tear up, here it was. Congratulations Price, you won.

You won everything and beyond.

“I thought you would like to go for a drive.” That was a bomb-shell suggestion. Rachel’s blurred vision was getting back to normal, but the world was still spinning in circles. The keys were dangling in Chloe’s hand. Of course, she had to find a keychain with a fucking flame.

The perfect girl being too perfect. Rachel stared to hope for the car to break. Just to make an excuse to crack a joke or to be able to hide somewhere. An explanation for not being able to repay her, all of them, ever.

“A drive? Now? My legs are shaking.” She mumbled into Chloe’s shirt. The same one she almost had ripped off a thousand years ago, like this morning.

“That’s why you have a driver’s seat.”

David and Joyce passed them, driving away. They shouted nice greetings, wishing them a safe drive and an amazing day. Rachel tried to respond, but was so clumsy and awkward that a gawky wave was the only thing she could produce. She would have to fix it later. For sure. Somehow.

Chloe led her to the car, opened the door, letting her in, then walked fast to the other side, parking herself on the passenger’s seat.

Rachel put her hands on the steering wheel, slowly adjusting herself in the new environment. They worked very hard on it. No rust, everything repaired and painted, polished and renovated. The car smelled like new, but she could feel the small undertones of their truck, the junkyard, the troubled past, the scent of home. The vintage car clocks, the light seats, damn… even seat belts… It was so beautifully done. She was done. They broke her fucking heart with their tenderness and love.

“This is amazing. You had to work so hard on it, baby. And I was such a bitch.” She lowered her gaze, not sure how to define her selfishness. She kept making the same mistake, over and over, wanting everything right now and here, not being patient or tolerant enough. She had tried, she really tried, but typically fucked something up in the end. Like now.

“Don’t talk about my woman like that. She’s a decent person.”

Rachel laughed fast, through a fresh set of tears delivered by her fucking tornado of emotions. Always bringing tears, not pizza; damn her fucking soul. She always had to react to tenderness like a wild, stupid kid raised by wolves instead of being gentle and caring.

“Why did you do that?” She asked, enthraling her sight on the dashboard vigilantly, denying the absolute indifference and recklessness of her blue-haired badass.

“Why?” Chloe seemed surprised by this question.

“Yeah, why?” Rachel was frantically looking around, and then with a snap she focused her sight on Chloe. Her girlfriend bit her lip. This was a gaze worth all the fucking stars.

“Well, we are starting school and you’re getting back to this being queen of Blackwell shit, so it’s better to come back in style. You need your own car anyway, because I can’t fucking stand this arguing about who’s gonna take the truck or why do you have to wait for me.” That was a reasonable explanation, but Rachel knew it was more. Way more.
“You know what I’m asking about.”

Chloe sat silently for a moment, shifting positions, allegedly getting used to the new roadster and not being a driver in general, but secretly trying to find the right words to give the true explanation, the genuine reason. Rachel was watching her patiently, even if the flames were burning in her calm gaze. She had the right to know.

“I knew a girl once, and she was my angel. She lost her fucking wings along the way, doing stupid shit. So, I wanted to give them back to her.” She gave up the game, too nervous and unprepared. “To you. I kept you in a cage for a long time. You hate being dependent, so you no longer are. This baby means freedom, and you can go wherever you want to, meet people…”

“Freedom?”

What is ’t thou canst demand?

Everybody always strived for it, dreaming of being liberated and carefree, but it sounded gloomy and ugly right now. Rachel didn’t want to be free again, not like she had been before. A sharp sting in her heart switched, punctured her insecurities again. Always so sure of herself, always so confident, she felt a kick to her stomach, seeing the gift in a new light as an invitation to leave, and she didn’t want to leave. Now or never. The open road was empty if traveled alone, even in this beautiful red beast.

Fuck the wings, and angels in particular.

“Yeah. I hope you will always come back to me of course. So, it’s like a trust thing. If you know what I mean.” Her girlfriend dared to expand the clarification, even if shy and abashed.

Chloe wanted to trust her. She wanted it so badly that she was able to sacrifice everything, give everything she ever had, and even jump from a high fucking bridge not caring about her own safety just to prove to them both that it was the right decision.

“Chloe…”

It was so carefully planned. The parents, the whole blindfold thing. It was a pure, very well grasped manipulation. Bait, line and sinker. Chloe had to know her girlfriend wouldn’t have allowed herself to accept this gift if it was presented in a different way. Having David and even Joyce at her side forced Rachel to take the seat, to touch the wheel and take the ride.

Chloe had learned from the best after all, and surpassed the master.

“Plus, I know you hate to drive my truck.” She offered another enlightenment, a simple motive, just to break the tension. They should celebrate for fuck’s sake, and Rachel was just delightfully melting here, without a special reason. It was just her own four wheels, damn it, nothing special. Every kid in Arcadia Bay had some, it wasn’t a big deal.

“I love your truck.” Rachel sighed, happy with the fact that they had switched the direction a little. “But you’re right, I prefer riding a shotgun. Or the bed.”

The whole truck was imprinted with sensual memories, the words and touches enchanted in this piece of rusty metal. That was why Chloe would never get rid of this old junk, even if she could prepare something way better for herself.

It was the time to imprint on yet another sweet ride.
“Are we going somewhere or are we just gonna keep talking in a parked car?” Chloe smiled. “You know it drives, right?”

Rachel nodded slowly and turned on the key in the ignition, starting the engine. The red beast purred, then growled loudly, proving that the best things in life don’t come quietly. It vibrated, ready to pull out for a jump and was one kick and push away from it. Rachel pressed on the gas carefully, trying to figure out how to tame this tiger, and the car followed her orders politely, passing the pavement in a slow crouching move.

They drove down the street, still fifteen miles per hour on the clock, enjoying the privilege of a sunny day and a convertible car. Chloe looked at her girlfriend, unusually careful and focused. She had a dangerous thing in her hand and was painfully aware of it. Almost as dangerous as Rachel herself.

“You like it?” Chloe had to ask.

“I fucking love it, baby. I just didn’t expect that much.”

Chloe relaxed a little bit. Finally. She leaned back on the seat, letting the anxiety go and inviting the enjoyment in. “Lowering your expectations pays off.”

The engine whirled in a sudden anger. The car flew off, running thirty, now forty just within a second. They left the drowsy alleys, the sleepy neighborhoods frozen in listlessness, and jumped on the main street, almost ignoring the stop sign. The car waved a little bit to the right, Rachel twisted the handlebar, positioning the wheels properly.

“They’ve never been low.” She shook her head. “You just keep surprising me. Over and over and every time I think I’m prepared for the next step, you just surprise me with another hella amazing thing....” Now it was fifty. Some guy turned his head in awe when they passed him by. It was an unusual view on an Arcadia Bay street for sure. “And just in case you were wondering, it’s the best thing in the world. I just want you to know…” Fifty-five and speeding. “That you can trust me.”

Something clanged by the front right wheel. It was probably the suspension. Chloe told David like five fucking times to check the landing gear and now it was making sounds. He had to be so damn stubborn, Mr. Fucking right, damn it. Then she recalled what Rachel was saying.

“I know.” Chloe murmured, lowering her gaze.

Rachel passed the shopping mall, the gas station and the banking center and pressed on the break to turn to the highway ramp. The wheels screeched, marking the asphalt with a dark scar. Thank God, Interstate 5 was almost empty at this time of a day.

“No, you hope. I know, I can see it in your eyes.” Sixty. “You want to trust me, but you don’t. Yet.” Seventy, and they pissed off a truck, trying to change lanes. “You expect me to kill you.” Rachel changed the lane again, sharply. Somebody honked. “Kill us.”

She had never driven the truck like that.

“I don’t want you to feel obligated because of this car.” Chloe swallowed hard, holding the handler so tightly that her knuckles went pale. Another rapid change, as they passed two SUVs, jumping on the HOV lane. A row of loud honks melted in one long yell. Screech.

“I don’t feel obligated, devoted or anything because of the car.” Eighty. Rachel looked into her eyes. “I want to marry you.”

The engine howled and lashed with another kick. Eighty-five.
“What? Rach, are you fucking serious?” Chloe could hear the blasting sound of the highway patrol’s sirens running after them in a chase. It was just her imagination, no one wanted to stop them. Yet. She closed her eyes, when the trees on the roadside changed into one green streak. “Are you that much attached to my poor, punk ass?”

Rachel slowed down a tad bit, avoiding the response. The breaks croaked lightly, almost firing up with the sparks. They got back to sixty-five, cooling down for a second. She could talk again.

“Well, attached to the ass too. I mean… if you want to…” Screech. “One day.” Screech again. “Eventually.” Another rapid turn. “Don’t freak out. Yet.” She looked at Chloe and then back at the road. They hit seventy, again. “Yeah, I know, it has been fast. The recovery and school and my fucked-up family, not to mention the RV asshole.” Eighty now. Passing some white Honda in a red swoosh. “I went through hell and back to be with you and I’m not going to give up. Not now. Not never.” Something bumped in the transmission, Chloe prayed it wasn’t the gear she thought about. Eighty-five. “And I really don’t know how to prove it to you. Because you prove your love every single day and on every single step. And I… I’m just running out of options.” Some asshole in a blue Chevy yelled a few vulgar expressions. They gave him the finger when they passed him.

Fast, faster.

“Rach…”

Ninety. Way more than the acceptable limits. Chloe forgot how to breathe.

“Let me love you for fuck’s sake.” Rachel passed three lanes at once, taking the exit to the beach, not slowing down this time. “Don’t provoke, don’t predict, don’t expect the worst.” She was hitting the fucking wheel, bruising her left hand. “I’m not going anywhere.” She was looking at her almost for a second too long, but focused on the road again, stepping on the gas even harder. “Just let me fucking love you, Chloe.”

Hundred.

“I’m trying.” She could feel Rachel’s hand in hers, calm and sure. Too sure. The road was ending. The white horizon of a beach was getting closer in an unstoppable hustle. The waves would swallow them in a second, they would crash on the metal fence by the entrance, hundred and ten, they were going to fucking die.

And then they stopped.

“Happy to hear that.” She heard, when Rachel turned off the heated-up engine. The beast was falling asleep slowly, still warmed up after this hella test drive.

Chloe didn’t recognize this place at first, being too shaken after the ride. But she remembered the spot very well. They parked many times at this wild beach, just to be together, especially at the beginning, when everything was so romantic and clumsy, and they were still on the road to discover how great the passion could be.

Was it intentional, or did Rachel just pick the location by accident?

“Now you know why I couldn’t keep you blindfolded.” Cracking a semi-sultry joke was usually a good defensive strategy.

“Don’t blindfold and drive?” Rachel was looking at her with pure adoration, with something that she rarely expressed. It was there at times, in the corner of her smile, in the blink of an eye, but she didn’t allow herself to slip and show it as wildly as she was doing it now. The old fears of being an
embarrassment, a dirty secret of the blonde princess, were still present, still active, even if Rachel was burning them down with her marveled gaze. Chloe sniffled and tapped the door with a sweaty hand, sounding as unconcerned as her raspy voice would let her.

“This baby really fits you like a glove.”

This statement was beyond obvious, so it wasn’t surprising that Rachel didn’t respond, watching her still instead with unexpected intensity. The silence was broken only with barely audible cracks of a cooling-down engine.

“You like to play with fire, Chloe. You gave an arsonist a pack of matches.” She finally spoke, still staring at her, studying, examining.

“If I didn’t appreciate the risk, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Risk, you say?” And Rachel’s gaze changed with one single twitch. As fast as the car ride, she freed herself form the seat belt, flipped her leg gracefully shifting through the armrest and finished her dance climbing on Chloe’s lap. Since there wasn’t enough space for such experiments, she opened the door on the passenger’s side, trying not to squeeze them both too much.

“Hey, what are you doing!” Her girlfriend smirked. She could see it coming. “Careful, I cut my hand painting those doors.”

Her hand got a kiss, every finger got a kiss.

“Forged with blood and fire. I like it.” Rachel’s voice was hazardously soft. “Come here. I have to thank you. Properly.”

She kissed her slowly, passionately and tenderly at the same time, covering Chloe with herself, pulling her closer, tangling her hair. It was expected, but also strange, altered in a good way.

“I hope you won’t thank my mom and David the same way.” Her girlfriend groaned, when the kisses reached her neck.

“Kinky. I need to celebrate this. With you.”

It wasn’t kinky though, wild or desperate like this morning. It was soft and caring, passionate, but careful. Watchful even, to some extent. Chloe’s shirt was taken off with one unhurried move. She didn’t feel shy, fascinated by a different shade of touch marking her skin. Then her belt got unbuckled yet again, the second time today, but this time there was no reason to stop.

What sayest thou to my most hopeful wish?

“Oh fuck, Rachel.” She couldn’t even hide how much she craved for her.

“I’m about to.” It was pleasantly reassuring. “Where is this blindfold?”

It wasn’t an easy task to drag it out from the back pocket of her jeans, but she somehow managed.

“Here.”

“Do you trust me?” It was all about trust today. Chloe nodded slowly, not looking away. Rachel bit her lip. It was a shame to cover her eyes, to lose the contact she strived for, but it was for the greater good. The disappointment of not being able to read her girlfriend like a book through her honest gaze passed quickly when Rachel saw her with the blindfold on. She had her in her power, shaking under
every touch, under every brush of the fingertips and every caress, not knowing what would happen next, but hoping for a certain destination.

Power, she had taken advantage of so many times.

Chloe predicted something rough and reckless, an explosion after the accumulation of emotions and the sharp, fast ride. Rachel reacted that way usually, first upset, angry, fierce, just to take her as direct as she could, hard, harder, forgetting herself in the pleasure. Chloe usually didn’t mind though, but this was… different. Way different.

No teasing.

Chloe felt like the whole thing was happening in slow-motion, no rush, no speed. She always estimated a bewildering turn when Rachel was in charge. A tease, a sudden stop, a sweet torment, a rapid bite. Something to take her off guard, make her slip, get lost for a moment, to show who took her over. Not this time though.

She could only feel and hear right now. The burning breath of her girl, her own heart beating fast, faster. The hips on her lap, moving slowly, seducing. One moan, one feverish breath and, of fuck, the touch, Rachel was there. Tender. Slow. No teasing still.

Was this a real change or a temporary caprice? What happened to the impatient fire?

“You know we are far away from everybody.” She heard a whisper, just by her ear. “You can scream as much as you want.” And yet another murmur to the other one. And a kiss, then a few words spoken just after somebody broke the contact, just to whisper again. “I will make your scream.”

She scratched Rachel’s back, when feeling her inside, expecting her to go crazy, madly firm, but not this time. Blinded but not lost, she reached for another kiss and got it without a single beg. Rachel was there, for her, for whatever she wanted and needed. Not trying to dominate, not to show who was in charge, but patient and loving, reading every wish, listening. She hadn’t listened for a long time.

I have thee in my grasp.

She was there for her when Chloe was coming, oh fuck, so fast, like a fucking kid during her first time, holding her tight, not obstructing and not letting go while she screamed. And damn, it was a scream Rachel hadn’t heard in a long time.

“Rachel…”

“Yeah?” Another soft kiss, brushing her nose with hers, her whole body so close. Rachel didn’t want to let her go, even if she wasn’t holding her that firmly anymore. Then a sigh of resignation and the blindfold was taken off. The world came back to its unusual beauty. Chloe looked at her in awe, touched her cheek just to make sure if she’s fucking real. But then good humor privileged over the tenderness, and a boastful smile flashed once, then again.

“Isn’t it supposed to be your birthday?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be my birthday gift? But since you mentioned it…” And she just took her shirt off.

“Rach…” Chloe was still watching her. Not a surprise, especially considering the fact that Rachel was topless. The kisses came back, this time with a tune of a plea and invitation. Somebody woke up
untouched this morning and was undone for a few long hours. This particular somebody didn’t demand anything and it was… confusing and beautiful at the same time. Typically, there was hella demand.

“Mhmm?”

“Do you mind?” The blindfold was still there, in Chloe’s hand.

“I thought you would never ask.” Rachel was shy. It hit Chloe suddenly, surprised her, affected with a blink or two. Her girlfriend lowered her head, so it was easier to tie up.

It wasn’t the first time they played this game. It had been three years with Rachel Amber for fuck’s sake. Although a similar situation with that piece of cloth involved escalated quickly into fifty shades of Chloe, including her being helpless and pleading. She didn’t remember them trying it the other way around, and even if they had attempted it, the moment was lost in passion and lust, vaguely memorized or forgotten entirely.

Rachel smiled shyly again, not sure why this was so astonishingly bashful. She felt Chloe’s arms around, her turn coming, her girl taking her, struggling a little bit in the most uncomfortable position in the world, good for a cheap romantic movie, not for real life, but fuck it.

“I love you.” She whispered. She loved to whisper, feeling her inside. “I need you.” In more ways than one. In a million ways.

She was riding her slowly and steady, not racing and not challenging, abnormally calm, letting Chloe decide every single move. No complains, no questions asked, no anger and no rage, but a lot of passion, broken moans, fast breath, frantic gasps of air.

She just wanted to be hers.

Chloe couldn’t stop watching. When Rachel was close, so close her nails was marking her girl’s back and shoulders, she was so tempted to take this piece of shit out of her eyes, just to look in them, watch the fire, but restrained, holding her closer instead. And then she pushed her to come.

It was fucking loud, long and included her name. Take that, Pacific Ocean.

“Happy Birthday to me.” Rachel mumbled.

Chloe didn’t say anything, just holding her, stroking her arms, drowning in her smell, hair, the passion cooling down. They didn’t even kiss, not then at least, sitting together on the brand-new leather seat of the beautiful red vintage car, rocking each other in an embrace, learning to let go and to come back fully.

Then their lips met, and the blindfold was returned to Chloe’s pocket. She would keep it for later, a girl could always hope. The day was still young, as much as the trust.

It felt almost like the beginning, the moment when they started learning about each other, and then got used to it, preying on the well-known tips and tricks, just to get satisfaction and feed the aggressive fire, both possessive in their own ways. They forgot how important it was to keep exploring, keep discovering, blatantly sure they knew the whole truth and that there was nothing more left to uncover. This day proved they both were entirely mistaken and it felt so damn good to be wrong.

Can you be shy and courageous at the same time?
When Rachel finally got back to the driver’s seat, putting her clothes in order and trying to comb her hair a little bit, she looked at her girl and had to smile. Chloe was grinning, with all her beauty in the early afternoon, with her blue locks brushed by wind and still damn fucking shirtless.

Fuck, she’s stunning. Why did Rachel never see that before? Why did she take her for granted?

“Convertible car, sunny day, beautiful girl. Now I feel like a Cali teenager.” Chloe winked, taking her hair out of her sweaty forehead. Dork. A hopeless dreamer, this one. Yet another gift from the universe to Rachel Amber. A fucking pirate’s treasure. Who knew there was some precious booty at the Oregon’s coast?

“I just gave you a Cali teenager.” Rachel’s brow rose in question. “Still a teenager, mind you.”

Her girl literally couldn’t move, still lazy and affected so badly with bliss and delight, with the stars in her eyes. Rachel knew her so well, the moment wouldn’t last forever, even if they both didn’t mind. It was about a time for a joke or a provocation and damn, the blonde didn’t have to wait for long.

“I’m definitely interested to explore California more.” Another self-satisfied smile. Oh, so that’s how will we play today?

“California or its teenagers?”

“Both.” That was bold.

“Be careful, I got jealous already.” Rachel was only partly joking. Maybe that was the reason they still hadn’t left Arcadia Bay. She didn’t want to share this treasure with anybody. Chloe gave her freedom back, but she wouldn’t mind a golden cage instead. She was damn fucking possessive, but… Well, just look at her.

“How jealous?” Chloe’s eyebrows jumped up with a teasing question.

Rachel looked at her one more time, passing her the lost shirt, and thinking for quite a while. She recalled all those girls and men checking out Chloe every single day, without her even noticing or reacting. About all those looks and seductive smiles her girl was blatantly ignoring, not aware of how many people were attracted to her. She thought about the whole fucking world, the world they both wanted to explore, fascinated and obsessed by Chloe Price, and then she whispered softly:

“You have no idea.”

This time, the first time ever, Chloe believed her. She grabbed her shirt, put it on covering her blush… and then a flash of panic shadowed her eyes. “Sunshine, we have to go!”

“Go where?”

“Go back! Another surprise, remember? I told you I have many.” Chloe was searching for her phone, scared that she had left the device at home, but found it with a sigh of relief and started to check the messages. Embarrassment usually flew away every time she kept herself busy, so she hoped for a similar outcome. She didn’t know how to react to this, or to believe the new version of Rachel Amber, who was patiently caring, instead of burning her the fuck down.

She liked the fire though. She liked this too. A lot.

“Any hints about the next one?” Rachel asked, starting the car again. The low murmur of the engine was soothing and damn alluring at the same time, melting with the crashing sounds of the ocean
waves. She would never be able to leave this car. And this girl.

“No blindfolds this time.” Chloe was still on the phone typing fast. She looked at her watch, then at the phone, then swapped some messages, typing, deleting, accepting, tapping. Her laziness disappeared entirely, while she worked hard on the next step. Damn, she missed a call, oh fuck, and she had to cover this one too.

“Pity. What about handcuffs?”

“I can cuff you later.” It was more a distraction than a promise, but Rachel would hold her to it.

“Damn, Price. I…” She switched to reverse, slowly getting out from the parking spot. “I love you so much.”

***

They came back to the empty house. David and Joyce were both working this afternoon and probably long evening hours. They expected celebrations, they knew them, heard them even a few times and would prefer to stay longer out of their home than to witness any kind of passionate activity between these two. It was respectful, but Rachel felt uneasy wondering how much they already had known about their sex life. Too much for sure.

The evening had been planned differently though.

Chloe was rushing with the execution, making a few calls and hiding in the garage, so Rachel wasn’t supposed to hear anything. She really didn’t, taming her interest at least for once. When everything was allegedly done, they ordered a pizza, a simple birthday tradition. Chloe had to share more technical details of her newest accomplishment, doodling and drawing complicated diagrams on the napkins stained by tomato sauce, scribbling and erasing to make it easier to understand. Rachel got it, some of it at least, enjoying the waterfall of words and pride.

Why had they gotten lost before? How had they been so close to a break-up? Rachel couldn’t remember, she didn’t want to remember. She wanted to listen about the fucking engine and transmission problems for the rest of her life.

Transmissions were important, that was what sunk in.

It was getting dark quickly, and Chloe had never paid that much attention to the hands of the clock anyway, so when they heard knocking she almost got a heart attack, jumped off her chair, then sat back, then got up again.

“Guests!” She informed loudly. “Wanna change?” She murmured, tangled in her discomfiture and the passed time.

“Unless you invited the Queen of England, I’m good.” Rachel shook her head, adjusting her flannel. She didn’t expect any people she would have to impress with full make-up or leather and lace. Not that she would mind impressing, but it was too late anyway, and it was usually a time-consuming process.

“Some queens might be included.” Chloe asked her with a gesture to join her walk to the door. Rachel got up, held her hand, tad eager and a little disappointed that she would have to share her time, her Chloe with somebody else. Damn, she had to stop this madness before it would be too late.

“I hope it’s not Victoria Chase.” She laughed.
“Yeah, I asked the whole Vortex Club to burn down our house and destroy your day. That was my secret plan from the very beginning.”

“Sneaky.”

Her girl didn’t know how to properly open or close doors, any doors in general, so Steph and Max almost jumped, morbidly staggered. Chloe noticed they were holding hands and smirked archly. That was actually the first time she saw them together and they were an adorable couple. Especially Steph with all her protectiveness and care.

“Happy Birthday, Rachel!” Rachel got a hug as soon as she reached the doorstep, first from her Blackwell friend, then from a girl that she didn’t know that well but damn heard a lot about.

“You, guys!” This time she didn’t forget how to speak, and no parents were involved to make Chloe act weirdly. “It’s great to see you two! Steph, you dragged Max here only for this occasion?”

“Not only.” Steph was extensively serious, and didn’t deliberate about obvious reasons. The birthday party was probably just an excuse to invite her girl to this forbidden town. Then she looked at Chloe. “The delivery has been delayed, but it’s on its way. You owe me, by the way.”

“I know. I owe you a shitload anyway. Thanks.”

Rachel rolled her eyes, hearing about yet another secret to uncover tonight, but let them in and closed the entrance door in a civil way this time. Chloe dragged Steph to the kitchen asking her some very detailed questions about powering up lamps above 400 watts. Technical issues were supposed to keep everybody else away, but Rachel didn’t get tricked. The cake was in order.

“I have a gift for you. A very special gift.” Rachel heard Max’s calm yet tense voice. She turned around surprisingly finding her still standing in a hallway. The blonde smiled carefully, skipping the ‘you didn’t have to’ obvious recipe on how to piss off your guests. It seemed important and a refuse wouldn’t sound right, even a fake one. She didn’t know Max very well, but it seemed out of place to play this game right now.

“Alright, now I’m curious.”

Max waved at her, walking into the living room, knowing every step, corner and wall in this house. Rachel understood abruptly that the tiny girl was way more familiar with this place than she, and it was a strange recognition, an uneasy feeling. She followed, not sure who was playing the role of a guest now.

They sat on the couch, facing of each other. Max grabbed her bag and took out a package, wrapped in a simple white paper. She put it carefully on the table, not sure if she should unpack it herself or let Rachel to do it, but then, encouraged by a simple gesture, she decided to proceed herself.

It got unwrapped. Carefully. Then presented in silence.

It was a polaroid photo, framed nicely in a wooden frame, looking a little bit weary, like someone was carrying it in their back pocket for some time. The photo itself looked a little bit lost with more than a decent amount of empty space around it, but it was for the style and would make a nice addition to a wall. The interesting part was that it was in fact a polaroid photography of yet another photo, a frozen place in time that Rachel remembered very well. She was looking at herself, 3 years younger, smiling happily and hugging Chloe to herself while taking their first selfie at a punk concert, back in 2010. Rachel had never printed it, it had been always a digital memory, a post lost on a Facebook feed, a simple cell phone snap, but now photographed and framed it looked different,
“It’s beautiful, so thoughtful… Thank you, Max. I haven’t seen it in a long time.” Rachel was looking at the gift, while her mind traveled through the bittersweet memories. “Chloe told you all the secrets, huh?”

Max just smiled.

The light of the post photographed image was different, less wild, more like a nostalgic memory than a vivid reminiscence of their beginning. Rachel looked at herself, recognizing the young fierceness, cockiness and pride, when the world was still fresh and free from mistakes, not bothered by any secrets and ugly truths. It was the time of her life, a very brief one, when she felt complete and in love, but all the enigmas had been still buried deep down, not even showing their ugly heads yet.

Chloe on the other hand, looked so shy, surprised but not angry, with those gentle eyes and an unsure questioning expression on the corner of her barely visible smile.

“An arm candy.” She murmured, recalling more and more of this special night and the days that had followed.

“What?”

“That’s how people at school called Chloe, when I posted it and it went viral.” She explained. Max frowned, totally surprised. It felt good to surprise her with something, with a small piece of sacred knowledge she had no idea about. Rachel shook her head. “Damn, I was so in love.”

“What about now?” Max asked quietly, watching her closely, too intensely even. It supposed to be an easy question, a playful one, but Rachel felt the tension and pressure. She was about to answer, when she got cut off again.

“She is even more. Same here.” Chloe appeared with a kiss, making it short for the guests’ sake. Then she looked at the gift entirely flabbergasted. “Fuck me, that’s a great idea. How did you get it?”

“I have my ways.” Another shy, yet confident of Max’s smiles. The girl didn’t look at them, sheepishly avoiding witnessing any kind of caress. Was it the guilt, the weight of some stupid dare months ago, or was she just that introverted and bashful?

“Digging treasures out like a true pirate, ya’ll? Your way is called Steph, I guess.” Chloe didn’t notice the tension, or decided to ignore it. She jumped over the head rest and landed just by Rachel’s side, putting her arm around her shoulders, dragging her closer to her chest, protectively and possessively. Good.

“Maybe.” Max shrugged, running away from her gaze again and blushed at the same time, but then got serious, looked at them, both tangled in a couch cuddle. “I wanted to give you something for the new beginning, for both of you. For the road of no return.”

It sounded so ominous that Rachel could feel her hair standing on end. She brushed the frame again with her fingertips, carefully, trying not to ruin the enchanted magnificence, looking attentively at yet another amazing, surprising birthday gift.

“There is no return indeed.”

The atmosphere shattered into shreds when they heard knocking at the front door, a stomping even. Steph, who was watching them from the kitchen corner was the first to get to the entrance, but Chloe was just behind her.
“Damn boys, you’re so fucking late.”

“Sorry, long shift.” Drew North appeared in the hallway, absorbing all the light and space. He had always been a huge guy, restlessly working on his muscles, so it was no surprise that he kept getting bigger. He was carrying a crate of beer like it was an air toy. “I tried to get here as fast as possible.”

“He really did.” Mikey was just behind him, always shadowed by his older brother. Rachel got up quickly, welcoming them both and refusing firmly when they tried to leave immediately.

“Please stay. We have cake. And the beer.” And her smile was enough to convince the North brothers. At least for a while.

The bottles got opened, the seats were taken, a smoke or two appeared in the air. The house was filled with laughter, the sound of tapped glass, small talk, memories, no tension, just a simple evening with people who cared. Or cared enough to be there. The cake had been served, cheesy songs sang and Chloe of course had to stain her whole shirt trying to eat with her fingers. Normal.

They had to see the car of course, visit the new four-wheels resident of the house, so they walked into the garage telling Rachel how lucky she was, and she was indeed. Mikey was shocked, Steph calmly impressed, Drew was excited as if it was his own roadster and Chloe was so damn proud. Max touched the red beast, focused and determined to recall a memory, a snippet of the past, but gave up at some point and congratulated politely. Rachel promised everybody a test drive and her girlfriend gave her a very specific dirty look that no one really wanted to comment on.

They got back into the house.

Drew, investigated by almost everybody, told his ordinary story of dropping out of college and shifting between shitty jobs to support his brother and father. Now employed at a gas station, he was saving up for some courses, but Blackwell was out of his range. The sad story of his accident and recovery taught him a lesson, he was working hard on his income, not interested in any shortcut, even if the possibilities were still there. When Frank was mentioned briefly, Rachel tensed, Chloe clenched her teeth, but no one noticed, thank God. Drew, already 21, didn’t complain, but the loss of his dreams was obviously bothering him. A future star forced to live an ordinary life with all his high hopes burnt down.

Rachel listened to him attentively, in a safe embrace of Chloe’s arm, with a bottle of beer in hand and a thousand thoughts in her mind. She remembered him, still eager and confident, bullying others and crediting towards his future fortune. One of the most popular and famous, remarkable athletes, now changed into an average man, still in his plainly simple work clothes, who was worrying more about a power bill than the next touchdown. Was that her future too? Would it happen to all of them? And the biggest question of all – would she mind?

Mikey, still a high school student, was listening quietly, drinking his illegal beer, not really keen on talking. Asked about his plans, he only mentioned graduation. Steph got him into DND talk, and young North relaxed a little bit, not used to socializing with others to that extent. To be frank, this was barely a party for Rachel Amber’s usual standard, but she didn’t care, enjoying every second. When dragons, elves and a possible new campaign took over a little bit too much, Drew tapped his empty bottle and got up.

“Sorry ladies, we really have to go. My next shift starts early in the morning, I wanna catch some sleep.”

Mikey followed his brother without a single complaint and both boys left, even if the persuasions and sweet encouragements were in order. The house grew emptier without them, even if they weren’t
fierce debaters, stripped from two less breaths and some of the testosterone.

When Rachel closed the door behind them, still thanking and promising another hang out, her phone rang. She looked at the display, and sighed deeply. Chloe caught her annoyed gaze and sighed too.

“Would you mind entertaining our guests for a moment? I have to call back.”

“You know you don’t have to.” Chloe frowned and got close enough to steal a simple kiss. She knew it was a big, fat lie, but wasn’t looking forward to seeing Rachel upset. Not today at least. Those phone calls were always painful, hard, complicated and didn’t end well.

“Yes, I do, baby.” Another heavy sigh. “I will be in our room.”

Rachel had to fulfil this obligation, as responsibly as possible. She wasn’t eager nor fervent about it at all, but she couldn’t run away from it any longer. She walked upstairs and locked herself in their bedroom, cutting out all the pleasant laughter and murmur of the friendly conversations, to call somebody she didn’t really want to talk to. Her father.

“Hi dad.” He picked up almost immediately, waiting for her to get back to him. It had been a rough few months, they weren’t on good terms, but he was still her father, her dad. The same person who had cared for her for most of her life, sometimes in a wrong official way, something in a wrong way, period. And he had been waiting.

“Happy birthday, Rachel.” She could hear he was at home, probably in the new Long Beach mansion, close to the ocean and to the terrible Los Angeles’ traffic. She could catch the echo of his words in evidently big hallways, probably tiled with marble and stone, in the worst and most popular California style.

“Thank you.” She snuggled into one of the blankets on the bed, which still smelled like Chloe. “And thank you for agreeing to my proposal.”

She had to touch this subject, since the demand was in thousands of dollars and the only response was two letters and a dot. ‘Ok.’

“Treat it as your… early birthday gift.” His tone changed, swiftly moving from nervous and false, to more anticipated and annoyingly understandable. “I’m happy you decided to finalize your education process and I’m really interested in your future career of choice. I’m also very content with the terms we both agreed on. It’s a wise decision, regardless of your emotional involvement. Speaking of money, I made the first transfer already. You can treat yourself tonight.”

Money. Could something be worth less than pile of cash? She closed her eyes, reaching for a cigarette, recalling the image of a red car, a lazy blue smile, a topless beauty and the white beach. She couldn’t remember why money was important in the first place. Damn you, Amber, you fall harder and harder for Chloe Price, you reached the new record high.

“Oh, I will. Thank you, dad.” She lit it up, inhaled. It felt good.

The financial aspect was already discussed, so now it was the time for some sweet birthday interrogation. Another reason to smoke, while she talked to her family. If she was ever gonna get lung cancer it would be their fault.

“How is everything?” It always started innocently.

“It has been great. I’m clean. I’m feeling ok.”
If he was asking for the drugs, the answer should be satisfying. She still remembered the disgust in his eyes, when he learned about the addiction, when he got the report about Frank and his shady friends, when she was confronted with photos of herself in very unequivocal situations, accompanied by those people. She would rather die than show them to Chloe.

Another inhale, a deep one, then one more, rapid. She remembered the slammed door, the disgrace, disappointment, harsh words, hush money thrown at her, and the emptiness, being lost, alone, begging for a savior. And the savior came, for fuck’s sake. She had been saved in so many ways, and her father rejected every single mention of the person who performed this miracle.

Hell is empty. All the devils are in Long Beach now.

“How are the Madsens treating you?”

Smoke was dancing between her and the door, creating a wry grey path she would follow after everything would be said. She would get back downstairs, laugh, smile and drink more, being loved and protected. Eventually. Rachel held onto this thought, breathing out another roadmap made of smoke and hopeful wishes.

“The Madsens? Like family.” Conflicted about whether the statement would hurt him and not sure if she really wanted to hurt him though, she quickly added “They’ve been very caring and helpful through the whole process.” Too official now, damn it. Inhale. Smoke. The tip of her cigarette lit up in a flame.

“I’m really glad to hear it and I hope to thank them in person soon. Rachel…” He sighed. She sensed he had something on his mind, except some plain birthday wishes and the credit cards. “I would really like you to visit Long Beach in the nearest future. Like I said, there is always a place for you, despite our previous arguments and misconceptions. Your mother and I are missing you very much.”

How surprising. They had had this talk before, they had gone though it already and she had said more than she should. Her father had previously used similar words, sentences, maybe he had this paragraph written down somewhere, to memorize the way to ask. How to talk to your troubled daughter, part one, first edition, printed in Arcadia Bay 2013.

Rachel wanted to refuse again. It wasn’t her home anymore, it wasn’t home at all, but she couldn’t force herself to crush all his hopes for a happy ending. His version of a happy ending of course, she really didn’t need another one.

I will not bend. I will not see thee flying forth alone.

“I will think about it. I miss you too.”

She could almost hear him nodding, as always when she was concerned and unsure, so close to bend to his requirements and rules.

“If you don’t want to come home alone, you can bring company.” That was new. And rich.

Rachel almost burned the blanked with the smoke, shifting her position hastily.

“You mean Chloe?” It was supposed to be a firm statement, but transformed into a shy and yearning whisper in the process. Sometimes her own ability to express herself was baffling.

Silence. He couldn’t say it. He couldn’t say her name. Still. Rachel knew he blamed her girl for everything that had happened to her and he couldn’t be more mistaken. The bad shit hit her, true, but when she had been away from Chloe, reckless and wildly looking for a new excitement. He couldn’t
even get the reasons behind her own stupidity.

“I mean whoever you want to accompany you.” Her father finally stated, finding a happy middle. Happy for him at least. Rachel smiled sadly.

“Thank you.” It was sincere and honest. As honest as it could be. “It really means a lot.”

It was more than enough for both of them. One more persuading request, one more complaint or reproach and they would part in anger as usual. It was her day though and he respected it. It was nice that he could respect something at least.

“Have a great day, sweetheart. Happy Birthday once again.”

And that was it. Not that emotional or scary this time. She could expect more though, the bridge was in construction, the communication in progress. She would have to find a way to stop him half-way, to show him exactly where she wanted to be, to resist.

Somehow.

She unlocked the door, ready to walk down the stairs and rejoin the party, not in a terrible mood this time. Her parents were on the road to acknowledgement, or tolerance at least. They might never fully accept Chloe, but she didn’t want to leave any doubts to feed their high hopes. One day they would understand. Maybe. One day. Eventually.

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Chloe’s gaze followed Rachel’s every step to the top of the staircase. The both knew what awaited her there, another shit-talk with her dad-douche, dad-Nazi, damn it was hard to find a nickname for this asshole without the ‘step’ article. When her girl disappeared in the darkness of the second floor, the blue-haired worry turned back and walked to the living room, prepared to crack some stupid jokes and lose herself in a chatter.

She found them in a whisper and a tender cuddle, trying to be private in public, playing the same game she had played with Rachel so many times. Max was already sitting on Steph’s lap smiling shyly and exchanging kisses from time to time. Chloe was wondering for a moment when she had switched from her armchair to her girlfriend, but always had problems absorbing reality when Rachel was around. Trying not to interrupt, she interrupted the touchy-feely shit between this cute couple, crashing on the couch and reaching for her beer bottle.

“Sorry, Rach has to talk to her parents.”

“Is everything ok? I heard it’s been hard.” Max seemed to slip out back to the armchair again, but Steph was holding her tightly and in place.

Chloe pretended she didn’t notice.

“On and off. They ain’t in town which makes it easier, but you know how it goes. Offish assholes always play the same fucking song of her coming back to be little miss perfect and in their care.” She ran her fingers through the blue hair, taking a long sip. It felt ridiculous to lean like a lazy bear on this couch when these two were squeezing together on one stool. Not her problem though.

“Over your dead body, huh?” Max was looking at her, stroking her girlfriend’s arm slowly, in a reassuring move like all those annoying couples did all the time.

“Damn right, Maximus Prime! They can stick their parental wish up their ass and run in an official
California marathon competing for the title of the biggest dickheads of the state. Or of the nation.” She realized how eager she was to vent about their problems. Stupid. It wouldn’t be nice to them, nor to Rachel. She always regarded problems with respect. “Fuck, sorry guys, I shouldn’t talk shit about them.”

“It’s fine.” Max’s voice was soothing and understanding. She moved a little bit, reached to hold Chloe’s hand but was too far and didn’t really want to leave Steph’s lap. Her girlfriend dragged her closer, way more relaxed and comfortable, obviously very content with the awkward sitting position.

“Seems like you both wouldn’t mind a small distraction from your reality then.” Steph winked, tactfully changing the course of discussion. “We were thinking that maybe you both would like to play some DND with me and Max and some other friends. Mikey would be delighted to see a resurrected Calamastia and socialize on the nerd level.”

“On the gay level, you mean?” Chloe laughed and scratched her arm, looking for her pack of smokes. “I mean it would be great, we totally have to resurrect that bitch. She was hella reckless. Who do you think Rachel would be? What would fit her?” Steph sent her an enquiring look. The question required additional explanation, she guessed. “You gave me my elf barbarian, you know your craft. Mikey got this wizard shit, Max is this ranger always looking for clues, so what would you prepare for my girl?”

Steph was wondering for a moment, with her chin on Max’s shoulder, like it was supposed to help her concentrate or something. If Chloe was in a similar position with Rachel, it wouldn’t help shit, but every couple had a different game, right?

“It’s a dangerous question.” She responded finally. “What about a forbidden dragon princess, striving to get her throne back?”

“It would fit too much and is way too common nowadays.” Chloe scoffed, pleasantly assured that all couples were similar to some extent. This was lame, even including the late evening and beer. Steph could do way better. “She would fucking burn us all, alive or not. Max, what do you think?”

Her friend became uneasy and shifted lightly on Steph’s lap.

“I don’t know her that well. A zombie?”

“A zombie?” Chloe frowned. “That’s rich. But since I’m gonna be hella resurrected, we would be a great couple. Met at the grave, starting a life together as freaking corpses, fucking together in heaven and beyond.”

Max grew pale, touching her nose, as if expecting another rapid bleed, and then blushed hard, trying to cover her face somewhere between her hoodie and Steph’s neck. The sudden change of colors was terrifying and cute at the same. Chloe watched her with her eyes narrowed. Max probably reacted weirdly to this ‘fucking’ part, but people do fuck, she does it obviously, so she shouldn’t act staggered or ashamed.

“You are supposed to be somebody else, not just show your real personality.” Steph trapped Max in a tighter embrace. To serve and protect, damn right. “That’s the purpose.”

“Steph, Gandalf the gay.” Chloe scoffed again, a bit playfully this time. She missed her fresh perspective, wise words and encouragement and made a mental note to herself to hang out with her, especially before Max would move in. It would be way harder to get together in a couple of weeks.

“I come under many names and have many secrets.” The beer was making Steph philosophical. She
might quote Shakespeare or Latin in a minute, damn intellectuals.

“She does. And many skills.” Max was supportive, as always.

The girls were looking into each other’s eyes and grinning like idiots. Chloe shook her head.

“You are both hella adorable. So, tell me something more, how did you start dating and stuff. Max, you didn’t tell me shit, too busy crying your eyes out missing Steph, damn you!”

Steph smiled even more, especially hearing the longing part, stole a kiss, but Max got reluctant, remembering the circumstances when they first talked about her relationship. It was a confusing memory, a reckless morning that would haunt her, and probably Chloe too, for a long time. She was still wondering how Rachel had reacted to the confession, but never found enough courage to ask her friend directly.

“I told you I have a girlfriend.” She almost whispered.

The blue-haired smoke finally found a new pack of cigarettes, unwrapped and lit up a fresh one.

“You didn’t tell me that your girlfriend is…” Chloe exhaled a huge puff. “... The well-known adviser in the Black the hell circles. C’mon, something to feed my punk ass curiosity. First date?”

“Art gallery.” Steph responded at once.

“Of course, why would I think it was at Steph’s bedroom.”

“That was the second.” Max added coyly.

Chloe almost fell off the couch, coughing. The damn thing supposed to be comfortably safe, and now she was struggling to sit up. She extinguished her bashfulness in another, long sip of beer. Max seemed more than amused, and her eyes were sparkling with a lot of pirate joy. People do fuck, Chloe, you do it obviously, so you shouldn’t act staggered or ashamed.

“I’m gonna shut up now.” It was a remarkably quiet blue-haired murmur.

Then she was saved, just before Steph stopped laughing her ass off. She felt Rachel’s hand on her arm, smelled her perfume and sensed her presence. The presence intensified when her girl sat by her side and freely leaned on her taking over the smoke. The world stopped being so awkward, felt completed and dressed in a red flannel and white shirt.

“Sorry guys, family business. Do you still have beer?” Rachel didn’t seem upset much, but refused to give Chloe any insights, not responding to a questioning gaze of the blue eyes. It was the cuddle and drink time. She might say something later, when alone, freed from company and way more naked. Rachel never liked to talk about her family, never elaborated, keeping her problems behind closed doors. She was trained that way, taught well. Her girlfriend kept forgetting she didn’t want to share this knowledge. It was painful enough to explain it to Chloe, but she was family. Right?

“Beer? I have something better than beer!” Chloe reached behind the couch, finding a bottle of Jack Daniels, still in a brown bag with a gas station logo. Drew North, you devil.

“Damn Price, you really want to get me drunk!” Rachel sighed theatrically with the best performance of the year, and dragged her ass over to the kitchen for a set of glasses and ice.

It was time to get wasted.
Parents should teach their kids not to mix beer and whiskey, especially after a birthday cake. Even a small amount of this cocktail might be treacherous and unsafe, especially in a shared space with one bathroom upstairs. The four of them were taught well, but danced on a thin line, forgetting about the parental advice. They didn’t go that far yet, but some of them were riskily close. Alcohol swept away all barriers, visible or unspoken, and the party, even if shy with numbers of attenders, started to get wilder. Music was blasting, smoke was whirling in the air and the bottle was getting empty in record time. Chloe invented some stupid game, to force a re-watch of “Blade Runner”, and sip on whiskey even more, but Rachel didn’t mind, secretly adding some water to their glasses.

Max had never been a big drinker and didn’t expect her girlfriend to be. Steph was very courageous trying to keep up with Chloe Price, but gave up responsibly at some point, lasting less than fifteen minutes, retracting to some sparkling water instead. She was thanked properly for the voice of reason, but a bottle of beer was appearing in her hand from time to time, despite the threat.

“Blade Runner” was taking unusually long and Max really wouldn’t mind stretching her legs a little bit. Her anxiousness was hitting her back and forth while her world was spinning a little because of this brown liquid invented by some kind of Kentucky devil. She was almost done, like really.

“Steph, would you mind taking a short walk with me?”

“I’m gonna go with you.” Rachel was surprisingly sober and was already getting up, not really prepared for any kind of refusal. That was exactly how Max portrayed her, how everybody described her. When Rachel Amber wanted something, she was going to get it. Steph looked at her girl, unsure, but Max just nodded, confirming it was fine, calm down baby, and just enjoy time with Chloe watching the whole movie like five times in a row if you wish.

A night walk with Rachel wasn’t something that she was planning or expected, but it was the blonde’s birthday after all, it would be rude to refuse. Max never got used to being rude. She wasn’t even sure how.

Two kisses were exchanged while two couples parted. One was cute and sensitive, the other passionate with fire and longing included, and off they went, closing the doors behind them, leaving their loved ones in front of the TV.

They took the same route as Max and Chloe weeks ago, during their last extremely tongue-tied mumbled walk. Silence, stars, night breeze, even the lights looked the same. The world was repeating itself over and over again. Damn Arcadia Bay and its limitations, damn this neighborhood, damn those houses and this pavement, but Max knew at least where it was going.

She peered at Rachel, being in her company alone for the first time ever. Even in the dark alley, it was hard not to appreciate her natural beauty, the way she moved, walked and smiled. She could wear only a flannel shirt with some rips here and there, but was passing the road like it was a runway. Rachel Amber was indeed a fucking gorgeous creature and Chloe was lucky. She was damn lucky.

Rachel could look carefree and relaxed, but she was watching Max surreptitiously. The girl looked smaller than she really was, troubled with her own thoughts and walked in total silence, almost holding her breath.

“Max? Can we talk a bit?” Rachel started finally, not really taking this soundlessness very well. It felt almost like funeral, and she didn’t plan to be dead in the nearest future. She was patient the whole evening, not saying a single word about the weird teasing, phrases taken out of context and double-
meaning behind a lot of the sentences. She didn’t get angry, didn’t break anything, but wished for some kind of enlightenment. To the one thing at least.

“Sure.”

Awkward steps on the dark pavement, unsure but even. In the same, slow pace.

“Max, about this email you sent me…”

“Yeah, what about it?” Max was studying her sneakers carefully, not looking at her, avoiding, eluding. A fucking thunder hitting Rachel Amber right now wouldn’t force her to lift her gaze. Not to mention this girl was allegedly very good with fire.

“It scared the shit out of me.” Rachel lit up another cigarette. Her voice will be ruined by so many smokes tomorrow, but hell, who cared. “Would you mind talking about it more?”

Max didn’t speak for a moment, what a surprise, thinking.

Step by step, thought after thought, she finally responded. “I don’t really know how much I will be able to.”

Rachel nodded slowly, feeding on the smoke.

“I don’t want to get into your business and I really appreciate it, but if this Jefferson guy is so dangerous, shouldn’t we report it somewhere? Like the police?”

“The police can be corrupted, Rachel.” Max smirked in a sad and unpleasant way. “Some reports can put you in danger. And I don’t have any proofs on me, nothing I can show them to erase the doubts. They would think I’m paranoid.”

Max didn’t like the direction at all.

“If he is so sick, there has to be a way, like a testimony or something we can use.”

“We?” It wasn’t a thunder though, but it forced her to meet those hazel eyes finally. “Rachel, I warned you not to get into this shit. Don’t go near him, I’m serious. Him and the Prescotts…”

Max didn’t even notice they had stopped in place, and now were facing each other in a confrontation. She always thought Rachel would be taller, but no, she was the same height almost, so it was way more difficult to escape her piercing gaze.

“Wait, is this about the Prescotts now too?” Rachel almost spit the smoke.

“Oh fuck.” Max groaned, now pretty much irritated. One more step, one more thought and she would cross the line. “Just stay away. Can you just stay away and not get involved?”

Telling that to Rachel could be a mistake. It was a mistake, full stop. The blonde frowned, and tapped the ash out with an angry move.

“Max, if somebody is hurting people, you have an obligation to stop this person. You can’t write emails to every single girl in danger, you can’t just warn everybody, you can’t save the world by yourself. That’s not how it works. He is a teacher for fuck’s sake.”

“I’m working on it.” She mumbled, not sure if they should keep going or turn around.

“You are?”
“What?” Max hissed more furiously than she planned. “I don’t look capable?”

Another inhale, in the same manner as Chloe always did. A long breathe in, quick stop to accumulate it, absorb, and then a long grey release. This time accompanied with a short head shake.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know stuff that you don’t know. A dear friend of mine...” Max turned her head away, her voice broke, she had to put herself together. “A few actually, got hurt by him. And let’s say the police didn’t believe them. It’s bigger than you think, Rachel, and right now a warning is everything I can offer.” Her ability to speak was questionable again. She touched her nose, just to check, just to make sure she wouldn’t treat Rachel with a blood bath and uncomfortable request for help. Everything was fine though. So far.


“Alright.” One long inhale and a barely visible shrug.

The walk could continue, but they both turned around going back home. It was a silent understatement, not discussed or planned. There was nothing else to say, to elaborate, no space for more questions or interrogations. Max breathed deeply, relieved. They ultimately agreed on something. Finally.

She looked at Rachel once again, still partly angry and still overwhelmed by her company, her mesmerizing beauty. It wasn’t a surprise that Chloe fell for her so hard, she was still falling and would never stop. Rachel was her whole world and beyond, she knew about it and planned her life on it. The blonde princess loved the blue-haired pirate and she was loved in return. Max didn’t need a special explanation, a pirate’s treasure map or any guidelines in general about why those two got together. It was fucking evident, because... Well, just look at her.

“Chloe wouldn’t survive without you.” She mumbled, not sure if Rachel would be able to hear her. “You know that, right?”

“I’m not going anywhere.” It was a statement, direct, firm, well-founded. She had to be asked about it before and was annoyed by it. Good. It was good for Chloe, right?

They were walking fast now, faster, rushing. She wanted to be done with this conversation, with those secrets, she just wanted one fucking calm evening, without diving into her most horrid predictions.

And then, entirely irrationally, Max got mad.

“Yeah, I know. I can see that. That’s good.” She was getting heat up in this talk, with every step and look at Rachel. She didn’t know why, she didn’t want to absorb the reasons behind it. “But don’t let anybody to take you away from her. Don’t fucking risk it, Rachel. Trust me.” Angry pause. “With this.”

“I will trust you.” Same pause in the same place. “With this. But when you learn more, just tell me. I can help, I have resources.”

“Maybe you do, maybe you don’t.” Max shrugged, shrinking inside. Something was telling her that Rachel might do something stupid soon. Something crazy, like burning down half of a National Park or something. Thankfully they were almost home. “Don’t worry, I will keep you informed. And I’m gonna go back inside, if you don’t mind. Steph is probably looking for me anyway.”
She almost ran to the door, not caring about being rude, polite or whatever else the world expected her to be.

“Yeah, good idea.” Rachel’s voice hit her when she was crossing the doorstep. “I will be right back.”

***

The evening was reaching its end. There were no movies to watch or re-watch anymore, no stomach to take another glass of booze and no throat to smoke one more. They got tired, and cuddly again, stretching the night with one more word, one more question and stupid joke, just to be with each other, to make it even more memorable.

This night, even if tense sometimes, was a good one. But when the all interesting subjects had been already discussed and laughed at, they had to get back to the basic, boring issues of everyday life. It felt good though, it always had felt good with a group of friends.

“Are you excited about getting back Blackwell and Victoria Chase’s little group?” Steph was obviously sobering up. She lost the battle with Chloe, but most importantly kept her dignity. Now holding her yawning and tired girl she was probably thinking about getting back to bed, and not really planning on some exciting activities.

School was always a safe thing. Victoria Chase could spice it up though.

“Not really.” Rachel was playing with Chloe’s hand, tangling her fingers between hers, feeling her touch, her body close. “She has already started to prey on my nerves, training before the fucking year starts. I don’t really care about this popularity shit though. Everybody forgot about it anyway and I’m pretty fine with it.”

Chloe smiled and cuddled her more.

“I wouldn’t be that sure.” Steph freed one of her hands and reached for a glass to drink up, still stuck to water. “Everybody still remembers you and the fact that there’s only one queen of Blackwell. Her last name is written in golden letters in front of the main building and it says -Amber.”

“For now.” Chloe smirked, finishing her beer. Rachel didn’t get it at first, wondering if that was a reference to Victoria Chase or the Academy’s housing condition, but then it hit her. Her girl, her beautiful blue-haired devil, winked, hummed something and kissed her ear, trying to pretend that the last name joke wasn’t important. But she felt the tension of a question, of a real confirmation so she sighed theatrically, rolling her eyes showing that indeed, she was pretty fucking sober. And yeah, ok, alright, serious too. “Don’t freak out. Yet.” She whispered.

The ocean of happiness in Rachel’s eyes made her forget about everything, even the fact that they weren’t alone. She got withdrawn again, brushing the blond hair out of her forehead and tried to smile bluntly, like pirates do, but Rachel got a shy, loving one instead, so similar to the first one, at the punk concert, three years ago.

They couldn’t stop looking at each other.

“Oh, did the note about the big news get lost in the mail?” Steph was always a wise girl, so she didn’t need a ton of time and thousands of thoughts, especially after looking at these two. Max was the most confused one here, first too tired to absorb the information, but then her eyes opened widely.

“Oh shit, really? You wanna get married? That’s awesome!”
“No rush with this shit.” Chloe shrugged, embarrassed with this public confirmation, holding her remarkably shy girl close. “Maybe. One day. Eventually.”

She was avoiding Max’s piercing gaze. Rachel on the contrary. She watched Chloe’s estranged friend who got edgy, tense, torn between sharing the happiness or breaking down with concern. It was worrying, unusual and damn fucking weird. Rachel couldn’t analyze it for long, because she got stormed by a kiss. A strong, passionate, not really a public one, tad clumsily, but really fucking loving. Chloe usually acted that way, first shy, upset, embarrassed, and then burning down herself. Rachel Amber always knew how to behave, usually not being rude to her friends or guests, but this time she got lost in her girl again, responding with all her fire.

“Damn Price, you got game. The gift fits even more now.” Steph coughed lightly hiding her smile. Those two were always very fierce, but she never had to witness it. Not to that extent.

“It does, Steph.” Max kissed her softly, not very keen to watch the performance. “It does.” And yawned, stretching slowly. “It’s getting late.”

“Oh-huh.” Steph looked at Chloe and Rachel lost in another passionate kiss. “It’s time to go home. For sure.”

***

They would have to make it up to them. Chloe felt uneasy when she walked them to the door, turned on like hell, and not even trying to hide it. They didn’t mind though, cracking very sultry jokes and mocking them both. Max was looking at her all the time, with this examining and studying gaze. It was beyond uncomfortable and even though Chloe really loved them both a relief was the first thing that came to mind when she finally closed the door behind them.

Rachel was probably in the kitchen cleaning up. It should be Chloe’s role tonight, but they both knew it would end badly including Joyce being more than annoyed. The biggest task was to erase all the splatted liquor and pretend that nothing illegal had happened in this house. Not that the Madsens would believe it anyway, but it was worth a try. Or lie.

When Chloe got back, the kitchen was empty, as well as the living room. Her girlfriend disappeared into the backyard, probably for the last smoke of the evening. She liked it there, absorbing the cold Oregon summer, unseen from the world itself, being alone with her thoughts and dreams. Chloe interrupted, as always, as she was expected to.

“I hope you liked your surprises.” She opened the squeaky door joining Rachel under the starred sky. Her girl found a sneaky way to get into her arms at once, almost instinctively. She was finishing her last birthday drink, mostly water with some vice, but still refreshing.

“It was a hella day. I loved them all, especially this one.” Rachel poked Chloe’s chest.

“That’s a given.”

“No, it’s not. I’m not gonna take you for granted anymore.” Rachel smirked, breaking the embrace and leaning against the wall.

“Maybe it’s a mistake.” Chloe stole the sad cigarette from her hand, wasted in half and not really smoked anymore and she got away with it easier than ever before.

“I know a mistake when I see one, trust me.” A small sigh. “Thank you for today, baby. I’m glad you invited Steph and Max, it was great to hang out with them without parents around. And the boys too.”
Randomly Chloe felt stupid. Maybe Rachel was just courteous? They both were used to wild parties, whole nights of drinking and dancing surrounded by dozens of people, potential or fake friends, enemies and beyond. Comparing it to this little get-together seemed silly. Maybe Rachel would prefer to invite somebody else? Maybe somebody who wasn’t… Max?

“Anytime.” She sniffed, blaming the cold front from Alaska. “I know you are used to more spectacular socializing, but I thought it might be a nice opportunity to just stay home and drink.” The necessity of explanation itself also seemed stupid.

A soft touch of Rachel’s hand on her cheek showed her how silly it was to even doubt if the surprise was proper. Her girl was really content but astonishingly calm, too calm even. Was she embarrassed by the moment of passion, making out in front of their friends? Maybe it was the last name thing…

“It was perfect, baby.” Rachel confirmed the simple fact, erasing all the doubts with one single sentence, then she winked in a devilish manner. “But you can’t jump on me in public. It’s not a typical, well-accepted behavior.”

It was supposed to be a reprimand, but they had both enjoyed the kiss too much.

“Fuck typical.” Chloe shrugged in her typical way. “Plus, they would do exactly the same thing if we would keep them in the house a tad longer. Those two can be dangerous, I can feel it.” She winked back, thinking of all the tender intimacy and tension between Steph and Max. It made her feel anxious again and was forced to stretch her neck to hide the weird shadow in her eyes from Rachel.

If her girl was thinking about any sinister things, it didn’t include those two. A tempting smile made an appearance on her lips again and was slowly getting wilder, even if she was still trying to scold them both.

“Maybe, but I prefer to not be stopped when being kissed in that manner. You wanted to show me off, I understand and I gladly responded to this wish, but I don’t think you would like to reveal every secret of our alcove to our beloved guests.”

“I’m not into kinky stuff. Much.” Another sniffle, damn you Alaska.

“Oh really?” Rachel’s brow furrowed, but her smile didn’t disappear. On the contrary. “Strange. It wasn’t my idea to blindfold myself in front of your parents today.”

They both giggled, then became silent in the same moment, recalling what happened just before and just after. The cold summer air got a little bit warmer instantly. Chloe could swear some of the stars winked at them.

“That was different.” She laughed when a warm breeze brushed her hair. “But I wouldn’t mind blindfolding you again under different circumstances.”

“You promised me the handcuffs.”

“True.” Damn, she had a lit cig, she can smoke some. “If you really want to...”

“That depends.” Rachel was wondering for a moment, testing this idea on the tip of her tongue, exploring the possibilities, planning and inventing an achievable way of execution. “Do you have an arrest warrant?”

Still leaning against the wall, she moved a little bit nearer, in that special sneaky way of taking invisible steps to get closer to Chloe again.
“You and your pre-law thing.” Her girl rolled her eyes. “Do I need one? I thought I just gave you some hints back there.”

A subtle nuclear bomb was dropped in the last line. The silence embraced them again, but it was warm, not scary, filled more with anticipation and shy happiness, then sexual tension or spine-chilling wonders. Chloe scoffed, not sure how to react, how serious she should be, what was expected of her and why those things always had to happen at once. Of course, she wanted to spend her life with her, couldn’t imagine her life without her, a commitment was out of the question, but the ‘M’ word was petrifying somehow. Like one push too far, one step ahead of her already strained luck.

“You did.” Tucking her hair behind her left ear was always a sign of being too shy for a real answer. Very few marks of tenderness Rachel would let the world to see, even if the meaning was well-known only to Chloe.

“I meant it.” The blue-haired confusion looked at her. “Really.” The confirmation came fast, too eager. Then a sigh came. “I’m scared shitless but yes, really. One day.”

It was hard to confess that she really didn’t take it lightly, that it was indeed a challenge, a personal inner fight. She expected Rachel to frown, take a step back, ask her a mocking question, force her, push her further to declare more secrets, more fears, but not today. Was it her birthday, or had Rachel really noticed how fucked up those talks could be sometimes? Or maybe it was just today’s magic.

She got just an unsure whisper in return. “Why scared?”

“Because I’ve never expected you to want me that much.”

“Why?” Yet another one.

Chloe couldn’t stand the tension, couldn’t bare the weird balance between tenderness and painful apprehension in Rachel’s voice, so she did what she could do best. She exploded with a wild gesture, a mixture of anger and timidities.

“Why? Is this your favorite question today? Is it that obvious? It’s because I’m Chloe Price, and you are Rachel fucking Amber.” Take that, you beautiful monster.

“For now.” Rachel’s hand was stroking her arm, calming down and uplifting. “One day when you’re gonna stop checking our IDs, you dork, maybe you’ll understand why I’m so crazy about you. Eventually. And I don’t want you to be scared and doubtful anymore. I’m here, for you, alright?”

Rachel was, she really was there, not leaving her side, but it was escalating fast, so fast, oh God, Joyce was right. They had been falling apart last year, arguing, hissing, fighting and fucking like crazy on every possible occasion. Then Frank, the drugs, too much drugs, too many sleepless nights, harsh words, everything at once, and now Rachel was switching her gears into this perfect loving girl, caring, listening, supporting like never before. Oh fuck, she was always loving and she always would be loved in return, but Chloe was scared, so scared that this fucking miracle wouldn’t last long, that they would fall apart again, her needs and fears would be forgotten, flooded by the blonde’s confidence and demand. And marriage... One day, eventually, if everything would still be good, still in place, still in shape. If Rachel wouldn’t run away in her new, shiny red car.

Chloe felt stupid for giving a blunt confirmation to Max and Steph, showing off something that was still in progress.

“Yeah. It’s hard.” She just nodded, not ready to share.
"I know. We will work it out. Together." Another reassuring gesture, another supporting smile. Was it her new reality? She heard those words before.

The stars winked at them again, less playfully though. Rachel was standing by her side, stroking her arm, sipping on her drink, thinking about which turn to take, how fast to push it, where to slow down and how rapid she could change the lanes. The right road was within reach but they weren’t there. Yet.

There was one more thing in her mind, something she had to talk about even if the time and place might not be suitable. Some old thorn, a rusted nail on the pavement, a lose gear making the ride ever more bumpy and uneven.

"Can I ask you about something?"

"Sure. What do you want to know?"

Rachel stole her smoke back, inhaled and returned to Chloe’s hand. She didn’t seem worried or angry, wondering more than really trying to find another crack between them. She was done with drama, she wanted to be done with it, so the easiest way was just to ask. Simply. Right?

"You are super awkward around Max sometimes, and she also kinda looks… tense. You try to prove something, she tries to accept things like they are, but… it seems like there is something going on, some confusion, a hurting contest or whatever. Should I worry?"

Chloe breathed in deeply through her grinned teeth, hissed unintentionally, switched positions, leaning on her right leg, then on the left. It wasn’t a question she predicted tonight, maybe never, but understood the reason behind it. There were a few tense moments this evening and even Steph’s company didn’t save the day.

Should Rachel worry?

"Of course not." Chloe responded with a fierce head shake. "Max is in a relationship now, moving in and shit. She even gave you our photo, our first photo, so…"

"I’m aware." Rachel stopped the unnecessary river of facts and obvious statements. "That’s not what I was asking about." She added, still soft and calm.

The truth was Chloe was confused and conflicted. She loved Rachel more than her own life, but seeing Max with somebody else had made her anxious, uncertain and lost. Just like a small piece that didn’t fit the puzzle, something was missing or there was a rock in her shoe. Technically you could still walk, but it would bother you more and more with every single step. She still didn’t figure that out, didn’t even try to, still too troubled and nervous about it.

Max was no longer a friend, not a love interest, not an attraction or a reckless fling. She came back into Chloe’s life with bewildering statements and tons of riddles, more like some stranger, whom she shared childhood memories with, than a person she was connected through a special bond. Being around Max felt dissimilar, way different than when they had been just kids, and even Chloe’s supposedly easy-going nature didn’t let her to grasp it and move on.

“So, what’s on your mind?” She asked finishing the cigarette, trying to be as joyful and careless as possible.

Rachel sighed slowly. She wasn’t sure if Chloe understood the fact that this trust thing went both ways, that they both had to talk and share to make things work. Even if it wasn’t pleasing or nice and could wake up some old demons and fears.
“I just want to know if you have feelings for her. Certain feelings.”

The perfect girl being too perfect and seeing everything. Chloe smirked and shook her head. This question had an easy answer. Whatever was perturbing her with Max wasn’t Rachel Amber’s biggest fear.

“No, there is nothing. Something occurred once and it was just a stupid challenge, I told you. Not to mention she was cosplaying you at that moment, so it should scream hella volumes. Nothing really happened.” She opened her arms with a helpless gesture.

“Alright, I believe you.” There was a hand in her hand, calm, loving, trusting.

“Really?” Chloe blinked. She expected an interrogation, anger and some fire, a storm of jealousy and speed-talk about honesty. Rachel was just looking at her, with an empty glass in her hand, ready to face any kind of trouble her girl would like to share. She was there, for her, and Chloe bowed her head feeling like a traitor.

Rachel watched her for a moment longer, playing with the glass, caressing every single crystal indentation, playing with time, her own doubts and taming her own jealousy. There was something more, more mysteries to uncover, more riddles and connections, but Chloe loved her and proved it a million times. Was it the time to start another fight about something entirely not important?

The doubts were supposedly good, if dosed properly. Right?

Rachel sighed and walked to the backyard door.

“Do I have any other choice?” She said, just before her hand slipped out from Chloe’s. “Besides, I trust you, Chloe. I trust you with my life.”
They weren’t supposed to be here, not today anyway. The sun had woken up not even a few hours ago, and was still stretching lazily, embraced by the swollen clouds. The day was looking promising, with the possibility of a small drizzle, as every bright future is marked with an option of an error.

Blackwell Academy, now a High School and College combined, opened its gates, welcoming new victims of the system for an orientation day. It had always been an awkwardly official event, when older students were playing adults, and the new ones pretended they listened, visiting hallways, classrooms and labs. Their guides, now politely amusing and supporting, would change into contemptuous monsters within a day. The beginning of a school year always worked a little bit like a moon for werewolves.

They weren’t supposed to be here, not today, not that early. They didn’t need any kind of guide or a flyer, both knowing every corner of this school and a decent amount of its secrets. It was partly why Chloe was grumpy, cranky and bad-tempered. First, she couldn’t find her favorite t-shirt with Pink Floyd’s famous quote about educational drives, and she highly suspected Rachel hid it purposely. Second, the coffee was cold and the box of cereals was almost empty. She couldn’t find another one and could fucking swear they bought like six last week. Most of them disappeared mysteriously and she would never suspect her girlfriend to eat all that sugar. Third, she had spent the last night learning, just like the last two weeks to be honest, which was humiliating and disgraceful especially in August. Moreover, she was actually really prepared and that conflicted her strive for perfection with the inner rebel. She was trying to go through her notes and textbooks in secret, but it wasn’t possible to keep the cloak-and-dagger thing while sharing a bedroom with a very watchful wonder of nature. This wonder was obviously very happy with her latest interests, but it wasn’t something a pirate would be proud of. And fourth, Rachel wanted to give her a ride today in her new beautiful car, probably to show off not only the machine itself but herself in it. It meant sharing her girlfriend with other people and Chloe didn’t do sharing very easily. She scoffed, feeling her girlfriend’s hand stroking her thigh the whole way and playfully teasing. It was nice, but it wasn’t. Not to mention that Rachel, with all her carefully prepared, supposedly natural look, make-up and those damn Ray Bans looked like a fucking movie star.

It was great to date a movie star, but it wasn’t.

Chloe was grumpy and, damn, they weren’t supposed to be here at all. Rachel parked perfectly, which annoyed her even more. She could never straighten her truck that easily, mostly because of its size, partly because of her own laziness, and her girl was sometimes too perfect, damn it.

“Ready for an educational mosh-pit?” Rachel stole a cranky kiss, while turning the engine off. She was more than amused by Chloe’s disaffection. Two young freshmen were looking at her car with their mouths wide open. Then they looked at Rachel, choking a little bit in even bigger amazement. They would choke even more when Chloe would get out of this car. She would make sure of that.

“As ever.” She murmured, giving them a murderous look. “Why are we here again?”

“Checking classes, looking around and… I have a troubling surprise.” A hand reached her thigh again and Chloe had to hiss, especially when she heard a giggle in response. She couldn’t even mention that she had gone to bed at three in the morning because of those stupid chemistry books so just sniffed lightly.

“A surprise? I thought you wanted to show off your car.”
“That too.” Rachel didn’t even pretend to hide how proud she was of this birthday gift. “And now get out of my roadster before my girlfriend sees you.”

As soon as the car doors were closed, Chloe put her hand on Rachel’s waist,dragged her closer and gave her a proper morning kiss, choking those two male watchers to death. Here you have, dickheads. This one was hers. She was venting so many times about Rachel’s possessiveness, but she was guilty of the same iniquity, usually too angry or too baffled to admit it. She didn’t even notice when she pushed Rachel against the car, which was accepted with more than pleasure and anticipation for more.

On the other hand, those two freshmen were probably enjoying it too much, so she tried to break off, but it wasn’t that easy. Her girlfriend didn’t let her escape.

“This is the ‘good morning’ I asked you for a while ago.” Rachel purred, adjusting the damn sunglasses. Chloe could see her overcast face reflected in them. “What’s wrong, baby? Stressed because of school?”

“No.” Chloe lied. “I’m hella chill. Let’s go.”

Taking her notepads and all the school stuff from the back seat brought back painful memories of getting ready every morning, the emptiness and sadness when she was walking through those grounds last time, but had to shake off the feeling and go with the flow. Not being alone helped tons though.

Rachel kept her promise and didn’t let Chloe’s hand slip from hers, holding her tightly and almost provoking everybody with her warning gaze. She decided to inform the whole Blackwell that she had a girlfriend now. Better late than never. They had never attended the school together, not as a couple, never had that chance. Chloe had wasted her opportunity for re-installment years ago and if she wanted to see her girlfriend during classes, had been mostly visiting the rooms, bathroom stalls or dorms completely illegally and, therefore in secret. Rachel had been putting her social queen act, not denying nor confirming about her blue-haired pirate’s existence, living her high school life to the fullest. She was never questioned or confronted with information of a potential involvement or even a relationship, spending time with Chloe anywhere else but school. It hadn’t even been intentional, not consciously at least, but Blackwell wasn’t a common thing for them, even if it had brought them together. Gossips had always been present, built on a passionate kiss somebody had seen or a sign of affection presented at the parking lot, but there were always a lot of rumors circling around about the most popular people, so no one really cared for long or treated it seriously. Rachel’s reputation as the ‘it girl’ permanently included being wild and crazy, so the rest of Blackwell’s crowd didn’t even pay attention, too busy trying to get into her pants anyway regardless of the company she kept.

Rachel Amber and Chloe Price together seemed absurd anyway.

It would change now. Rachel, with her careful movie star image and new red vintage car really wanted to show her girlfriend off, praise her with affection, proving her involvement. Deep down she felt guilty of keeping Chloe as her dirty secret for years, even if inadvertently, but since Blackwell wasn’t a separate instance now, not her own scene only, she felt obligated. It was a nice obligation, a happy one, not requested or pressured. Chloe would never pressure her to do such a thing, even if she would feel troubled and lonely instead.

A lot of things had changed, they changed, she changed and fuck, she had a right to do it and didn’t plan to back off. Plus, it shouldn’t be that problematic after all. She would be still popular, still famous, still loved and admired, but with her loving company, right?

She peered at Chloe, supposedly calm and laid back, knowing perfectly well how overwhelmed and
nervous her girlfriend really was. She didn’t give a fuck about being together in public, but the big comeback to school was making her edgy. Chloe had rejected the idea for years now, and her own eagerness and hidden enthusiasm scared her to death. She didn’t spend the last weeks in the books just to impress her girlfriend. She really enjoyed the fucking science thing.

Can you be a pirate and a science geek and the same time?

She felt Rachel’s grasp, still firm and intransigent and it was giving her fucking wings. Chloe Price would never admit how damn fucking happy and content she was with her girl’s decision. She doubted Rachel would really play this game full-time though, she always had to have some doubts, so was silently prepared to get back to the shadows just in case. Always ready to be kicked in the stomach and dropped into a dark corner, just waiting. The day was bright though, the future seemed pretty damn fucking brilliant, and no dark corners seemed accessible or possible. Not anytime soon.

New students, teachers, assistants and even parents were passing them not paying attention to the two girls in love. It was the last day for preparations, to move into the freshly renewed dorms, definitive farewells and running final errands. The last day of summer smelled like the upcoming fall, with rain, excitation and potential trouble. Most people were walking fast, feverishly, yelling, calling each other, competing with time and the crowd itself. They navigated through the flock of students swiftly under Rachel’s command, and Chloe could swear that the sea of assholes was breaking apart just to let them pass.

The small favors and privileges of walking with fire.

Just before Chloe got relaxed enough to put her arm around Rachel’s shoulders with a blasé gesture, they were finally stopped by a familiar voice and the face that followed.

“Rachel Amber.”

“Victoria Chase.” Chloe’s girlfriend responded, taking her sunglasses off with one smooth move, shaking her golden mane, and presenting herself in the best spotlight possible. She had a gift for sure and knew the rules of high school wars, but still was keeping an eye on Chloe not letting her to back off. The blue-haired trouble just smiled broadly, dragging her closer. Not a chance to step back this time.

“Chloe Price, if somebody was still wondering.” She grinned, with her hand on Rachel’s arm put so nonchalantly.

Victoria’s lips twisted in a wry grimace, but she put herself together in record time. Her golden necklace glinted in the sunlight, when she adjusted her Versace shirt. It wasn’t just a nervous act but an excuse to present an obnoxious Blackwell ‘Your guide’ orientation pin. She always had to be involved in any Blackwell activity, a college one especially, mostly for the credit, but frankly she couldn’t stand not being noticed everywhere and by everyone. Poor kids, who would believe her sweet words and treat her like a potential faithful friend in the future.

“Since we passed the introduction stage, I wanted to welcome you back into our humble walls. It’s been way too long.” Victoria switched to the infamous role of the gracious host and potential ally. She still seemed to not notice Chloe, even if Rachel was making her more and more visible.

“So thoughtful of you, Victoria. We are both very grateful.” Rachel tilted her head with a false smile. She still seemed to not notice Chloe, even if Rachel was making her more and more visible.

“So thoughtful of you, Victoria. We are both very grateful.” Rachel tilted her head with a false smile. Chloe knew this one very well. It meant nothing nice, especially in the nearest future, but still was socially acceptable. Stabbing somebody with a knife might be not.

“Grateful?” Victoria’s eyebrows rose carefully like two arcs of a lifted bridge. “Well, you shouldn’t
be. It has been a pleasure, really. I would love to chit-chat with you a little bit more, but I have some stuff to do.” She gave Rachel a careful look, reminding them more of a poisonous snake than a friendly sophisticated lady. “I hope we will catch up later, when you will be more... accessible.”

Rachel moved closer to her girlfriend and her potentially friendly smile didn’t change a bit.

“I don’t really think I will be more….” Her hand on Chloe’s hand, firm and secure. “…accessible anytime soon, but I’m looking forward to bitch about life with you. It has always been fascinating.”

“Yeah, we have a lot of things to discuss and manage. We gained a lot of new members in the Vortex Club, I’m sure you would like to be introduced. A lot of things have changed though, you might use an… orientation.” Another measuring and judging gaze, though bit distracted and troubled. Victoria wasn’t even hiding that this was indeed a confrontation and planned up more. Rachel knew this act as well as her own, but the fates were on her side. It was two against one though, even if Chloe was just standing there looking damn freaking hot.

“I’m sure we will find a common ground.” Rachel nodded politely, agreeing. Not. “We always have. Right, Tori?” They knew how much the most stylish girl in Blackwell hated being called that. Rachel was rarely letting herself go that far, but her patience had been eaten this morning by one particular blue grumpy cat.

“Riiiight.” The fashion snake gave them another long and watchful look, and then pretended she was extremely busy with her pen and notepad. “Anyway, it was good to see you... two.” Ah the pause of hate, how sweet. “Tomorrow is the big day, ladies, don’t be late!”

“I’m sure we won’t. See you around, Tori!” And this reassuring touch on Victoria’s shoulder. Rachel, you are so beautiful when evil.

When they finally parted, leaving the friendly enemy behind, Chloe had to ask.

“Tori?”

“Oh, fucking blow me.” An angry shrug was everything that her girl wanted to offer as an explanation. The sweet conversation played on her nerves after all. That was the price of being an eremite for such a long time. Her tolerance to bullshit was low.

“No, you blow me, Rachel.” A kiss on her ear and a small nip usually helped with erasing the tension. Same with the old inner joke, which had never been a joke in a first place. Their own fucking anger management therapy.

“Planed and organized already.” It worked. It was always working. Rachel laughed freely, tugging her closer. “Now it’s time for the surprise.”

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Chloe’s nonchalance disappeared at once. Her eyes were wandering through the walls covered with posters and photos, some of them her favorite ones. She looked at the stocked-up boxes of her favorite cereals and one of her favorite pillow cases covered with drawings of old galleons, trying to find a clue, an explanation. She turned around once, twice, then looked back at Rachel, opening her hands in a helpful gesture.

“What is it?”

“A dorm room?” Her girlfriend, still leaning on the door frame, was watching her carefully. The way she played with the keys in her hand was the only sign of her nervousness. It was a troubling surprise
indeed, and she hoped that her girl would let her explain without running away three times in a row or getting upset.

The last one was out of the question though. It already happened.

Here came the drizzle, the dark clouds flew in again. Chloe’s heart broke in a million pieces, and the sharp edges of shattered bits spiked her stomach and throat. Speechless, she felt her shoulders weaken, dropping down, as if somebody had just cut her wings off.

She went numb. Again.

“Are you moving out? Moving in?” Chloe wasn’t even sure which term would be more fitting.

Rachel was more than prepared for that reaction. She closed the door, walked to her, closed her in a loving embrace, cuddling her from behind. It was heartbreaking seeing all the blue-haired fears reappearing, all the confidence vanishing once again, and this time Rachel could only blame herself.

“No, you dumbass. I would never do that.” She said softly. “That’s the surprise.”

“I don’t get it.” Chloe murmured, cracking her fingers with a creepy sound, ignoring her girlfriend, blurred with the overwhelmed panic. Rachel hated this, hated seeing her like that. She prepared everything carefully, trying to minimalize the distress so it was only temporary, but fuck, Chloe was hurt.

“Let me explain, alright? Baby, look at me.” She tried to reach her eyes, but Chloe turned her head away. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re not?” The bold pirate was so vulnerable right now, so tender and fragile. She wasn’t crying though, not yet, still finding the scrapes of hope inside, still holding onto them with her uneasy and fast breath.

“No, I’m not. I just fucking came out to Victoria Chase in case you didn’t notice and wouldn’t do it if I was packing my bags in secret. Come here, please.”

She pulled Chloe lightly to sit on the bed. It was easier to hold her there, not dancing on her tip-toes all the time. Her girl dropped on the mattress heavily, just like a kid’s broken toy, an electronic teddy bear with an expired battery.

“Alright, baby. Are you listening?” A soft nod was the only confirmation since the sight was out of Rachel’s reach. “My father persisted that I have a room in the dorms, so I agreed. It absolutely doesn’t mean I would move out if that’s what you were thinking, but we would have a hidden place on these forbidden grounds only to our disposal, in case you would like to take a nap between classes or… proceed to other activities, without worrying about being silent.” She finished the monologue joyfully, doing everything she could to sweet up the mood. She knew it wouldn’t go easily, but it was still harder she expected. Even for her. Especially for her.

“Your father made you do it?” Chloe’s gaze was grim. She shifted a little, seemed like she wanted to get up, but a slow begging gesture kept her in place. Rachel was trying to hold her as close as possible, protect as much as she could from the horrid hit of the ugly shock. Chloe noticed her girl was shaking a little, stressed almost as much as her.

“Partly. We agreed on the room. I never said I would be living here permanently and not without you. We don’t really have to sleep here at all. I’m not obliged to. Unless you would kick me out.”

“Don’t even say it. I would never...” Chloe shook her head, finally holding her back, kissing her
forehead. “I’m not sure how my parents will react…” She murmured.

It was true. Joyce might not be so welcoming after all the reservations she had built up and doubts she had. Previously the Madsens didn’t have a choice but to let Rachel stay since she was indeed homeless and Chloe’s best friend. When she moved in, Joyce and David had been relaying on this profoundly outdated version of them being just gal pals, fooling around from time to time. It had expired in front of their eyes almost 4 months ago, and even got a visual and formal confirmation.

Now Rachel had a place to go, to stay, so they might not be so sympathetic anymore and put her deprivation of their only daughter to a halt. She had made Chloe to go back to school, alright, but it might not be enough. Every hospitality has its limits and Rachel wasn’t sure if she hadn’t reached them already. It was troubling and problematic, but she had a plan and tons of high hopes. Worst come to worst, they could always stay here.

“We will work it out. I will work it out even if I have to beg your mom. I’m not going anywhere, not from your bedroom, baby.”

“Beg my mom? My mom loves you, sunshine.” Chloe smirked. Finally. “You are family.” And then the kiss came. It helped a little bit, but still the hardest part was in progress. To shrink the distance, to adjust, to understand and accept.

To trust.

They sat in silence, listening to the shouts and laughter coming from behind the closed windows. It was an odd feeling, just to be with each other, in this newly renovated and arranged room, in a peaceful embrace, when the whole world outside was getting crazy putting itself in order.

“It was a small price to pay for our bright future and fuck, it was supposed to be a nice surprise. I’m gonna talk to David myself too if that would help.” Rachel knew very well that Chloe’s step-dad was the biggest supporter of their relationship in the Cedar street home. The ex-marine was a simple guy, but recognized the value of their commitment, not asking too many questions. Joyce was way more careful, even if she didn’t say a word about her daughter being gay.

Chloe got up, walked around, adjusting to the space, to the new environment. She opened the closet finding some of her own clothes already prepared, ironed and folded, including her lost t-shirt. There were some of their favorite CDs, their photos were even on the fucking wall. The whole room was yet another of Rachel Amber’s bold statements of her undying devotion to her poor punk ass. It looked like a nest; a nest for two free birds, prepared with care. And in secret.

Chloe hated secrets. She knew why Rachel had to hide the whole arrangement though. Her own fear would push her hard into arguments and fights, making it more complicated. Now, even if it was a safe landing, she felt trapped, not in charge of her own life, not being able to control what would happen next. It was just a room for fuck’s sake, just a stupid demand of Rachel’s father. Chloe understood this demand, knowing she wasn’t his favorite, and the big bucks he was paying for their education would have to be repaid somehow. And damn, Rachel really tried, she tried fucking hard to make the space look theirs. It felt theirs already. Somehow.

“If you’re gonna pick a house for us one day, maybe you would ask for my opinion about the colors of the wall at least.”

Rachel was watching her when she was discovering the space, all the elements carefully placed together, screaming in detail how much she cared. Focused and watchful, Chloe wasn’t really looking for a sign of betrayal, but expected it anyway. She always expected something to go wrong, some mysterious agenda, a conspiracy theory. Everybody lies, no exceptions. It was painful, but
understandable. That was Chloe, the blue-haired anxiety and unsureness.

“We can change whatever you want.” Rachel was still sitting on the bed, not disturbing the examination. “It’s just a starter. But if you would like to tag something, here you are.” She put a black marker on the table.

Her girlfriend’s favorite toy, alright, second favorite toy, woke up a joyful spark in Chloe’s eyes.

“I have a condition.” Her girlfriend turned to her, with way less sorrow in her eyes, controlling the potential delight and trust as much as she could. She really wanted to hope for the best, but there was always something stopping her, like an invisible leash of fucking despair, a possibility of grief and losing herself again.

She didn’t even touch the marker.

“A condition? Alright.”

Rachel mentally prepared herself to witness her girl tagging whole room with obscenities and quotes that should never be written down, only memorized and repeated under strictly controlled and intimate situations. But whatever Chloe wanted she would get, period. The blonde finally gave up fighting over stupid things, focusing only on the most important battles.

“You are not allowed to…” Chloe took a deep breath, noticing that she was in fact in charge here. “…Spend a night here without me.”

“Bossy. Jealous. I like it.” Rachel got up slowly in the most seducing manner and then gave her a short kiss. Too short. “I would never spend a night away from you anyway. We already agreed on this. But if you’re worrying that I’m planning something stupid, sinister or unfaithful…” She had to stop for a moment, just to take another breath. “…We have Steph and Max on the same floor, so they will watch both of us like fucking hawks.” Rachel stroked her cheek, not teasing or seducing this time. “See? Everything is prepared for Chloe Price’s safe landing.”

Her girl nodded, but was far away from any significant symptom of overwhelming enthusiasm. The slim path of understanding was growing wider, the options were thought over. Rachel’s effort started to pay off.

“Are you angry?”

“No.” Chloe shook her head. Her anxiousness didn’t go away by any means, but she tried to tame it slowly. She was moving her shoulders in an awkward way, physically trying to shed off the weight of self-doubt. “You really thought it through.” She added, after yet another tense pause.

“I had to. I didn’t want to upset you.”

They both would kill for a smoke, but the dorms’ code of conduct forbade such a sinister pleasure.

“You didn’t.” A final sigh of relief, then a short blue laugh. “Now I will have to recall all the sneaky ways of how to get into your dorm room again. I can feel the scratches on my elbows already.”

Getting to Rachel’s bed was never safe in any means, but getting there at night, partly drunk or stoned, blatantly snubbing the risk of falling from a second floor on cement pavement was very dangerous. Chloe had taken the risk too many times in the past and wasn’t very keen of getting back to this routine.

Her girlfriend rolled her eyes.
“Baby, first, it’s our dorm, not mine. Second, you are a student now, you don’t need to sneak in, you can just fucking walk into the building, like rest of the people, remember?” Rachel put something in her hand. “Here.”

“What’s that?” Chloe twisted the metal object between her fingers, not really sure what she was looking at.

“A key? You know, to the door? So, you can open it?” Yet another roll of those hazel eyes. “I made you a copy, you dumbass.”

Her wonderful amazing girl was looking at the key like she had never seen one before. It was real and obviously hers. With a pirate keychain. Number 224, the closest one to the entrance, far away from everybody else. Their room.

“Does your father know about me getting a copy?” She asked softly. This family business was bothering her regardless. She didn’t like the idea of James Amber paying for the school nor for their place to stay or… the place to perform other activities. It didn’t feel right, even if she had never sincerely contemplated that Rachel was already in a similar situation staying under Joyce’s roof.

“My father knows as much as he needs to.” Rachel was sure her eyeballs would roll the fuck out one day. “But if he’s gonna ask, I won’t hide anything, if that’s what you meant. I’ve never had to. He has to fucking get used to having you around. And… Oh…” Tucking the hair behind her left ear was in order.

Not good. Another secret.

“Yeah?” Chloe’s palms got sweaty again. The first surprise was indeed kind of nice. They could use a break from her mother’s irritated gaze and David’s encouraging smiles. Although Rachel prepared something more, and knowing her, the next revelation would be more challenging.

“Any plans for the second week of October?”

“I guess I do have plans. I’m gonna spend some time with this amazing Rachel Amber girl. She’s sexy, maybe I’ll get laid.” It was supposed to be funny, but Chloe was still staring outside through the closed window, caressing the key in her hand. It was a tiny red line she was balancing on. It would be so much easier to reject the whole concept, blame her girl for hidden arrangements and storm out rather than just shyly remind herself that she was loved. Loved very much.

“Oh. Pity. I wanted to take you to California.”

“No shit, you wanted to take me there for over three years now.” Chloe was still looking at the crowd thronging outside, deep in her thoughts. She wasn’t in the mood for a runaway talk.

“Oh God, not like that.” Rachel sighed deeply. “My parents want me to visit, and I can bring company. So, since you are my company, I want you to go with me.” She finished with a cute girly smile that she always used when introverted and unsure.

“To visit your parents?” Chloe finally turned back to her, stunned and hesitant, not sure if she was hearing her right. Rachel wasn’t shocked. She wouldn’t believe herself being in Chloe’s place.

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“In California?”

“Yup.” Another nod.
“Wait, you want to drag my poor punk ass to your fancy Ambers’ home for an official family visit? Again? Now?” The information finally sunk in, and Chloe’s eyes grew bigger.

“Uh-huh.”

“It equals disaster.” Chloe looked at her, not sure if Rachel had lost her mind now or if she had always been insane. Then she shrugged, still not believing the invitation was real. “I really hope they didn’t get any glass tables this time.”

“I think they learned their lesson.” Rachel got her back to sitting on the bed again, thankfully. After all this nodding and eyes rolling she could use a good hug and a nice kiss. “I will try not to break anything and not to make out with you just before the dinner so you won’t be so hopelessly turned on and soaking wet the whole fucking time telling my dad stupid jokes.”

The sultry pun brought some bright smiles and a recollection of uncomfortable but cute memories. The dinner, the family argument, the horrid news, the morning after, the events that had followed, their whole life just starting.

“At least I didn’t hide in the bathroom.” Chloe always had to mock her girl because of it. Then the news finally it her. She got it, and choked on the long breath she was taking. “You… You want me there for real? I’m not great around parents, any parents, your parents in particular. If you want to bond with them, maybe it’s better for you to go without me. I… I usually fuck things up.”

Rachel knew what she was doing when she encouraged her to sit on the mattress again. It was the perfect moment to cuddle her, to kick the fuck out of all the ridiculous doubts Chloe had. Of course, the family visit would be painfully awkward and the served dinner not eatable, hence they wouldn’t be able to swallow a single bite. Still, it was a requirement, an opportunity for them to thank her parents for expanding their future chances. Chances that Rachel really wanted to take advantage of. She really didn’t care if Chloe would say something weird, because it was a given. That was partly why she loved this astonishing creature.

“Oh baby…” She dragged her closer so she could properly look into her eyes while talking, not fighting for every single gaze. “I knew it would be hard to explain, or for you to absorb it, so hear me out. You are a part of me, Chloe, you are my family and I don’t want to bond with my parents without you. I don’t want to make a scene, I don’t want to throw you in their faces, but I don’t want to pretend that you are just some stupid high school phase that I’m gonna overcome soon. This is serious, we are serious, at least you tell me that every day. They have to learn how to tolerate us, start to understand that it’s not gonna end anytime soon and why I’m so hopelessly in love with you. If you don’t want to come, if you feel it’s not the right time, it’s fine, really. You don’t have to. It’s just a suggestion, but it would be hella nice if you would go with me.”

The trusting innocent blue eyes were watching her in silence.

Rachel really wanted to do it. She didn’t want to hide anything, from anybody. No dirty secrets hidden between the junkyard trash, no dark corners whatsoever. She was truly going for it. It was touching. It was nice. It was huge. Chloe wasn’t sure if she should get angry or tear up. Or both.

“Just think about it alright? It’s just an offer, I’m not gonna drag you there against your will.” Rachel knew her and could read her like a book. She could see the flow of emotions, from excitation, through touch of a rebuilt trust, to disbelief again.

“Seems you are forced to go there either way…” Chloe was very close to agree to this strange venture, but something stopped her. She knew what. Her own stupid fear that it was just a fucking
dream. Or a nightmare. Or an impossible wish. Or she didn’t know what. And really needed a
smoke.

And a beer.

“Happens, will happen, life. I can’t erase my parents from it.” Rachel shrugged. “Sometimes you just
have to do small favors for the people who raised you and cared for you, even if you’re estranged
from them and they don’t really accept who you are and who you are with. It seems fucking unfair,
but that’s how it works.”

It was too wise for Chloe Price at the moment. She expected something more like ‘fuck that shit’
kinda response, not a lecture about responsibilities towards some rich people who raised her
girlfriend and in some strange way seemed to be connected to her poor blue punk pirate ass.

“And a beer.”

Rachel just laughed lightly, brushing a lost lock of hair from Chloe’s forehead and looking at her
with such fascination. She was astonished again, thinking of how much she was worrying the whole
previous night that it may take days or even weeks for her girlfriend to absorb the information, but it
turned out better than she had expected, excluding the first shock of course. They moved in a silent
synchronic dance changing position, so Chloe could put her head on Rachel’s lap and finally stretch
a little bit on this damn dorm bed. It was unexpectedly comfortable and she wouldn’t mind spending
a night or two here. Especially with this amazing company.

“Because I want you to visit my parents? Or because you would see some other places than Arcadia
Bay at last?”

Chloe got silent again, still playing with the key, moving from one hand to the other, tinkling the
keychain with her nails, twirling it between her fingers.

“I don’t know. I will think about it, ok?” She said finally.


“We ain’t gonna walk there.” Rachel kissed her nose and giggled a little. “And speaking of Steph,
let’s see how it’s going. The girls were supposed to move in today and might need a helpful hand. Or
two. Or four.”

They got up, then Chloe kissed her hard, so they landed back on the mattress again, first bursting in
laughter, then breathing faster in rising passion. It would be easy to forget all the harsh moments,
erase them once and forever with a different battle, but they both parted before it went too far,
promising each other a decent continuation in several hours. Or in a few hours at least.

The movie star image required adjustments afterwards, so Rachel turned to the mirror, while her girl
just put her beanie back on and looked around the room one more time, seeing it in a new light, not
as a treason or betrayal. Her girlfriend had to struggle organizing this, stressed and nervous about
how she would react. She was alone, she had to go through it by herself, not sharing nor
complaining, silently preparing for a confrontation, an explosion of rage and distrust, or maybe a
fight. She didn’t say anything, eating up her fears, confronting her father, bringing their stuff here,
creating another home away from home. She would never tell how much worry it costed, but Chloe
knew. The realization was hitting her harder and harder, like silent punches of empathy, and she felt worse with every strike.

"Wait." She stopped Rachel, when the door almost got open. "Come here. Please." Her hug was desperate, eager, apologizing. "I understand, ok? I’m just being this stupid asshole sometimes and I stop believing and shit. I feel so fucking dumb for making a scene. I’m sorry, sunshine, I’m really sorry. I love you so fucking much. You have no idea." She dejectedly tried to find the right words, but everything sounded so plain and simple. It felt like she was living in the most beautiful love song and couldn’t tune up to the main note, always marking a little bit too high or too low. Always fucking up the final theme.

"I know baby, it’s hard. If it’s too fast, it’s fine. I just…” Rachel was reading her mind again. "It was just such a roller-coaster of shit lately and this schedule is not really up to me.”

It was true. Rachel had to do it today and she did it on purpose planning and maneuvering everything that way to get rid of this problem, this drama, before school would start. The tight agenda didn’t give her much time or space to circulate the air, to hint more signs, to prepare better… And Chloe always needed a safe landing, Chloe always went first. She needed to be cared for.

"I did whatever I could.” Rachel almost sobbed, and hearing her girl apologizing again added quickly: “Baby, it’s fine. It’s ok. I knew how you would react.”

“No, it’s not fine, never has been fucking fine, I shouldn’t act or react like an idiot and we both know it. I’m really trying to change it somehow, I will try harder. I know how much you do for me and for us. I really do and you are fucking awesome. It's just…”

“It’s ok.”

It wasn’t by any means, but Chloe Price finally decided to do something with her trust issues and work on her constant fear of being abandoned. She had to fucking stop this, stop apologizing, stop stressing Rachel the fuck out, stop creating this atmosphere full of tension and shit, especially in non-smoking locations. She must. She must fucking grow up or whatever her mother was saying. Stop hurting her girl. Just fucking stop and start trusting.

Being an adult was shitty sometimes, she stated officially.

Rachel was reading her mind yet again, she was doing it more and more often, as if their thoughts became a commonwealth, a joint account of feelings. She smiled, kissed her and pushed her out of the room not saying a single word. It was done, it was ok. Case closed.

She really could be an awesome lawyer.

“Another condition.” Chloe decided to strain her luck even more today when they were walking though the dorms hallway. The nonchalant, protective arm on her girlfriend’s shoulders was back. They were in public again, it demanded a demonstration.

“One more? You are getting greedy.” The demonstration of the ownership got an enjoyable reception.

Victoria Chase passed them again, walking fast to her own room, located apparently on the same floor. She didn’t say anything, but this time her sight was less judgmental, and more confused and annoyed. She probably didn’t get the memo about her new neighbors. It would be an interesting year for sure.

Rachel winked at her.
“I am greedy when it comes to you.” Chloe didn’t even try to lie. “I wouldn’t mind testing this room and celebrating the beginning of the new school year in the nearest fucking future. Today would be nice. Or, to be more fucking specific, in a few hours. And yeah, you are invited. Naked.” She scratched her arm, thinking. “Or not naked actually, I can undress you myself.”

They had just gotten to Max and Steph’s gate to happiness, so that kind of interesting matter should be discussed now or after the visitation. Rachel put her hand on the handle, knocked, and before she pushed the door in, sent Chloe a silky smirk that always made her girl shiver.

“Agreed.”

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Max and Steph were facing each other, stopped in half-step and at mid-sentence. It didn’t look like a right time to disturb or interrupt, but someone yelled ‘come in’ before they opened the door. Rachel noticed the tension, but their friends relaxed almost at the same time, welcoming their guests with hugs and bright smiles. She really tried to guess what this fuzz was about, but no one was keen to offer any hints whatsoever. Chloe, who walked in a second later, didn’t sense anything unusual, and was looking at the messy room, filled with boxes, bags, clothes thrown around and unhung movie posters.

“Nice nerdy nest.” She decided. Rachel wasn’t sure if her girlfriend was aware of the fact that this was just an early stage of putting everything in order, not a final one. Chloe might have problems noticing, since her own bedroom looked very much like this all the time. Or had looked before she had moved in.

“It would be nicer if Wells didn’t give us shit about it already.” Steph gave up under Rachel’s questioning look. “We had to fight with that homophobic asshole the whole morning.”

“What did he do?” Chloe looked at Max, who ducked her head and blushed. The confrontation with the master of Blackhell had to cost her tremendously. It didn’t look like a great way to start their new, presumably romantic adventure.

“Some people are against the fact that we got the only double room here, because you know. Gay.” Steph explained with a voice full of anger and disgust. “He was trying to illuminate us on how terrible it would look for the school and stuff.”

She ran her fingers through her hair, calming herself down and reached for her girl’s hand. Max grasped it instantly. Rachel sighed with relief. So it was just high school drama, not a relationship drama. It was good to hear, since she really supported these two, also because of personal reasons. They hadn’t been in touch much since her birthday party, but she could tell their commitment was even more profound now and they both acted more natural.

“It sucks that he had to ruin your first day.”

“It’s a girls’ dorm, what did he expect?” Chloe sat on the bed and laughed hard, knowing how wild everybody could get, especially during some Friday night parties with the Vortex Club around. No student of Blackwell was guilty of innocence and avoided fucking, drinking and smoking. The only reason someone would be free of the high school sins was not being popular enough or not having the right people around.

The girls relaxed way more, sharing a small hug. Max broke off and turned around, helplessly trying to arrange the space better, moving a blanket from the top the dresser to the bed and putting some books in order on the shelf. It didn’t help much, but it freed her from the grasp of her anxiety.
“Who else is on our floor?” Rachel decided to change the subject, not really wanting to dive into potential problems with Wells. Problems, that also could hit her and Chloe at some point. Her girlfriend didn’t seem upset by that matter, usually facing those kinds of issues without a single blink. Not everybody was in the same comfortable position though, and Chloe kept forgetting about this simple, yet terrifying fact.

“Uh, Victoria obviously, and her two minions, Taylor and Dana.” Angry Steph was usually fierce with wit. “Que paso, banana, banana, kiss, ass, kiss.” Chloe almost fell out of the bed laughing, hearing her adorable minion-talk interpretation.

“Familiar faces.” She added, coughing and giggling at the same time.

Steph wasn’t amused. She was still angry.

“And some unfamiliar, like Kate Marsh, for example.” Max really tried to save some of her folded clothes Chloe sat on, but it was too late anyway and it would be hard to drag them out. She made an effort or two and gave up with a deep sigh. Rachel sighed too, coming to the rescue and gently pushed her girlfriend out of the way, passing the stuff Max needed.

“Do you know her?” She asked, not running away from a kiss. Chloe, combined with a bed, usually meant kissing, despite of circumstances and company. She could go with Rachel to a fucking city office or any other serious institution and start making out if the seats were fluffy enough.

“I kinda do.” Max nodded, to Steph’s surprise. “Kate is very nice, likes drawing, has a rabbit, and… Yeah, she’s very religious too.”

“Religious?” Chloe’s brow furrowed. “She’s gonna freak the fuck out with the wild shit going on here.”

“She’s a good person.” Max stated protectively, crossing her arms on her chest. Rachel and Steph exchanged questioning glares. The girl noticed it, so she ducked her head again and murmured. “Actually, I have to ask her a thing or two. I will be right back.”

“Whatever you say, Maximus Prime. She will flip either way.” Chloe yelled, when Max left the room, walking unexpectedly fast.

Steph breathed deeply, not really understanding her girlfriend’s weird reaction, but blaming the Blackwell faculty for the situation anyway. There was more stuff to worry about, like an illegally parked truck for example, and that occupied her mind way more than Max having some religious mysterious friends at the dorm.

“Chloe, would you mind helping us with the boxes and other stuff?” She asked, shifting to a more important matter. “We still didn’t have time to unload everything and Mikey couldn’t make it today.”

It would be stupid to ask a movie star to lift boxes and drag them to a second floor through those stupid steep stairs, so Chloe was the only one addressed. Rachel wouldn’t mind helping, but lifting wasn’t her thing, so she gladly didn’t notice her being excluded. She could use some time alone, and investigate Blackwell’s new social scene.

“Sure. Rach, would you mind?” The blue-haired help got up from yet another comfortable dorm bed.

“No problem, baby. See you around. I will socialize a little bit.”

***
Socializing was an art Rachel learned before she had known how to walk. The rules were quite simple and not too hard to absorb, but to master this craft required time and patience. The first step was an observation, a careful watch, who to talk to, who would be the right person to introduce her to the circles she would like to get involved with. Second, was to find a good place and time to start a conversation, usually filled with fake compliments and exposition of a dishonest interest in things that the selected person would be passionate about. The third was the verification, if the basic judgment was correct and the action implemented properly. The last stage was to expand the circle for more accomplices, getting them attracted to her, being fascinated by her, to the point that she would be ruling them all. Like she mentioned, it was simple.

Rachel picked the right place and time and hopefully the right person. She spotted Dana in the notorious meeting place, known as the smoking corner, where she was just losing herself to a pleasure of having another Marlboro. When she heard the steps, she almost dropped the cigarette, ready to run away or pretend it was a pure coincidence for her being there.

Guilty and scared, an easy target. That was how Rachel liked them.

“Oh Rach, it’s so great to see you again!” Dana was so relieved and happy, that Rachel almost believed her words. They had been almost friends a long time ago, but shared more differences than common interests, especially when it came to her drama club colleague’s avid attachment to Victoria Chase.

“Fancy to see you too! How is everything?” Rachel knew it wasn’t an enemy, just a stranger, so she relaxed a little bit not expecting another battle, but planning an investigation instead.

“Oh my god, awesome!” There went the excitement. Somebody was willing to listen to Dana’s unstoppable rant. “You won’t believe it. I just got back from Paris, you know, France. My parents really wanted me to see the wonders of the world. It was super uber amazing, like really. All those nice palaces and places and the tower.”

“Sounds astonishing.” Rachel also reached for a long-waited smoke, she craved for it through the whole dorm room conversation with Chloe. Paris was a nice and safe topic to discuss, she had visited the city twice with her parents, knew a thing or two. Should be easy.

“I can show you some pics, you will flip!”

The cellphone beeped, and the pictures came, mostly including tons of selfies of Dana wearing an enormous hat and stylish sunglasses. She literally had taken at least one on every single fucking street of this poor old town and in front of every possible tourist attraction covering them almost entirely. Rachel didn’t flip as promised. The slideshow of photos was taking forever, and even if she obviously didn’t expect a presentation about French architecture, there were way too many self-centered vacation snaps than she presumed to see.

The first rule of socializing was not to judge before they got addicted to you.

When the flow of memories of silly encounters stopped and Dana didn’t have anything interesting to say, she finally paid attention to Rachel. “So, what are you up to? Want to come back to the drama club?”

“Not really.” Rachel put her sunglasses back on. It was high noon and the sun really started to hurt her eyes. Those Ray Bans weren’t just an accessory after all. “I might be too busy with my other assignments.”

“Shame!” Dana was always dramatic and loved to present this side of herself. “You are such a great
actress. You are wasting your talent, like really! You have to rejoin! Mr. Keaton would take you back in a heartbeat!"

Rachel missed acting. Not the lying part, not the pretentious crowd around, but the freedom of being somebody else. She was indeed a good actress, she was very well aware of it, and a Shakespearian girl for sure. The drama club activity didn’t fit her plans though, but maybe she should make an exception and add it to her schedule. It would be nice to drag Chloe onstage one more time and sweep her off her feet yet again.

“I will think about it.”

The first encounter went pretty well and Rachel was about to leave this location, swiftly moving to a different one and to hunt down another victim, but she spotted a familiar figure walking in their direction. Fuck.

She couldn’t back off, not walk away. Not now anyway.

“Welcome again, Rachel.” It seemed that Victoria Chase was stalking her today. “What a nice surprise to be enlightened by your face for the third time this morning. I see you got rid of that poor girl at last.”

It would be a beautiful opportunity for Rachel to renounce her girlfriend, but she didn’t plan to, on the contrary. That was probably asking herself why Victoria had brought that up. Maybe she wanted to mock her relationship, or was simply curious in her own sneaky way.

“No, I didn’t actually, but thank you for expressing your interest.” She had to take off the sunglasses, damn it. It was always good to observe Victoria’s face without an additional shadow during a confrontation. Rachel always liked to fight her battles in the sunlight, not missing any detail.

“What’s your deal, Amber?” Last name stage. Somebody was losing their shit. “Why are you yanking her around anyway?”

Rachel nodded slowly and sadly, with a fake comparison and phony understanding.

“You are speaking in Nathan’s tone, Victoria, and we all know you are better than this.”

It hit her, it was a nice blow. The young Prescott was close to her, maybe even closer than the blonde movie star presumed. Rachel didn’t know the story behind it, not all of it at least, and wasn’t very interested, but it was a weapon she could use at the moment. She still vividly remembered their conversation at the diner over a month ago.

“I would really appreciate if you stop attacking Nathan.” Victoria grew defensive, more than she should be. “He’s very sensitive and doesn’t take it that well. Bullying doesn’t go well with your academic abilities. You are way better than this.”

Rachel loved to win, loved to conquer, and loved to share her merciful smile just before the successful grand finale.

“Don’t worry Victoria, I really feel for him.” She spoke softly, only partly lying. “He’s a very lost young man and I’m very happy he has your support, somebody he can truly trust with his insecurities and troubling issues.”

“He does. Thank you for recognizing this simple truth, Rachel.” Ah, the hand on her shoulder, presumably uplifting. How sweet.
If the fashion snake hoped Rachel wouldn’t get back to speaking of Chloe, she was more than mistaken. The decision had been made, a statement would follow. Chloe went first, and she wouldn’t be offended by anybody and anywhere any longer.

“Of course,” Rachel graciously shifted her shoulders to shake off Victoria’s hand. “…but I would really appreciate you not offending my girlfriend anymore. It would help with the common understanding and how things will work from now on.”

Her statement was bold and definitive. It was met with a silence, surprise and shock.

“Your girlfriend?” Dana opened her mouth in a very theatrical awe. Rachel could literally count all her fucking perfect white teeth. The drama club girl grew pale and was close to fainting. It was unexpected, especially after all the interesting things always going on backstage at the club and all the drunken kissing experiments that her gal pals had gone through in their high school years, but no one actually labelled them or stated anything so confidently.

Victoria, way more accustomed with the situation, especially since this morning, put her hands on her waist and looked at Rachel with an imitation of compassion and pity.

“So, Nathan was right after all.” She nodded slowly. “You are all gay now?”

“It’s a very private question, Victoria, and I’m sure you wouldn’t like to go into details with me on this issue…” The word ‘gay’ couldn’t be spoken, not now or never in this company, maybe not in any company. Rachel wasn’t sure why, but she couldn’t force herself to say it. “But yes, Chloe Price is my girlfriend if you haven’t noticed. I really don’t know how you could miss the memo before.” She finished her sentence with a helpless gesture.

More uncomfortable silence surrounded the grey smoky corner. Victoria and Dana were looking at her almost demanding more explanation, but no one ever forced Rachel Amber to bend to their will, and this would not change for sure. She just kept smoking her cigarette, watching them through her narrowed eyes, supposedly content, but she could feel the shivers of nervousness under her skin, for the first time in years.

Was she supposed to blame her long-term isolation or the ‘g’ word circulating around?

“Well, good for us.” Victoria shrugged finally and her sweet smile followed shortly after. “You will miss out on some fresh college meat, but whatever. Your choice. More testosterone for us.”

“I’m sure you will put it all to great use.” Rachel agreed with a merciful smirk. She knew very well it wasn’t going into the direction she wanted. Protecting Chloe was one thing, discussing her own issues was another.

Victoria Chase was more than pleased at taking her off guard, even if that was just a small slip on Rachel’s side. She changed into a worried friend once again, trying to support her with her poisonous assertions and toxic sweetness.

“To be perfectly honest I don’t mind if you like girls more than, you know, normal people.” She shrugged supposedly casually, knowing how harsh it sounded. “It’s quite original, fits your edgy style. Although I’m very much disappointed in you, Rachel. No offense, but you could do so much better than Chloe, really.”

Her eyes narrowed too, knowing she just won this battle. There was time to back off or to start insulting, a rare circumstance for Rachel Amber.

“I don’t think so, Tori, I really don’t think so.” Rachel put her Ray Bans back on, covering her eyes
and slowly walked away, feeling that she lost this little fight after all. She even forgot to trash a dead cig butt, still holding it between her fingers.

It was supposed to be so damn, fucking easy.

***

When Steph was leading them both to the parking lot, Chloe let herself to smoke. She ignored all the annoying red signs with the crossed cigarettes, treating them more like suggestions that a demand. No one reprimanded her though, but a few students looked at her with admiration and visible interest. She shrugged and ran after her friend, who was almost by the truck. A big one, a fucking U-haul packed with stuff and furniture. Chloe gasped in terror. A few boxes? Good joke.

“Dude, it’s a whole fucking truck!” She yelled when Steph maneuvered the big thing to park it as close as possible to the entrance. How the girls were supposed to fit all this crap in their dorm room was beyond Chloe’s imagination, but she focused on the most actual challenge.

“Sorry! I thought Mikey would help. I would call and ask but got busy with Max and stuff.” Her friend finally closed the door, jumped off from the cab and opened the trailer.

“Busy with Max, huh?” Chloe threw out her still lit cigarette, grinning broadly.

Steph just sighed, but shared the smile, and then she disappeared inside of the truck, thinking of what to take out first. Chloe, standing in the early afternoon sunlight waited patiently and wondered how Max managed to steal almost half of her house. She even recognized some of the things carefully packed and wrapped in the foils and blankets. She could swear she had seen this lamp in Max’s room years ago and this couch was very similar to the one her parents had had in their guest bedroom.

“So how do the Caulfields find you?” She yelled into the U-haul, hoping Steph didn’t get lost in the dungeons of the trailer. “Do they like their daughter’s choice?”

“They don’t know.” Her friend finally appeared, dragging some cartons with her. “Max didn’t come out.”

“What?” Chloe almost lost her balance, reaching for one of the boxes.

A huge package described as ‘lenses’ passed from hands to hands. Chloe put it carefully on the pavement, pretty aware of how expensive the equipment inside was.

“She hasn’t told her parents.” This time it was some framed photos, heavy and not easy to hold. “Still figuring it out stage. Kinda.” Steph cleaned out her sweaty forehead, thankful for the blue-haired help.

Chloe couldn’t believe her own ears.

“Really?”

Cartons described as ‘books’, ‘text books’, and ‘comix’ were next. They kept passing the heavy load from the track to the ground. Chloe tried to get involved more with taking stuff out, but Steph was in charge here and knew exactly when and how she needed her help.

“Max said it’s too much to bear at the moment and I support it. Even if it feels awkward being referred to as her good study friend all the time.” She offered another insight, when they were done with literature. Potentially.
“That has to be... hard.” Chloe didn’t know how to react. Her own situation was more than clear now and frankly she never had to deal with a similar problem.

“It is and it isn’t.” Her friend was panting lightly. It was indeed a heavy load. “Max’s parents will probably learn the truth one day and she will confront them then, but she doesn’t feel ready yet.”

A few backpacks of clothes, a tent (Why would they need a fucking tent anyway?), polaroid paper counted in packages, same with films, negatives, photo magazines. It would be a long afternoon. Chloe almost kicked the ‘lenses’ box by accident, so she carefully moved it closer to the parking wall.

“And you’re ok with that?” She asked, not sure if that was an acceptable question. Max never mentioned anything, but she never thought about touching this subject.

“I love her. I play my game, she plays hers. I can’t force her to follow my choices, even if it would feel reassuring.” Steph was looking at the couch, wondering if it wouldn’t be too much for both of them. “I don’t want to feel reassured and see her miserable, struggling with this, if she pushes herself too hard. This whole pressure about coming out, just after you start dating your first serious girlfriend, or even before, is overwhelming.” She lifted the damn piece of furniture and pushed it as hard as possible. Chloe caught it on the other side at the very last moment.

“Everybody is pushing... and pushing...” One more move and the couch landed on the parking lot. “… just to get out of the fucking closet. Some people are not ready, she’s not ready and it doesn’t mean she can’t be whoever she wants to be or – simply is. Or be with me.”

A lamp, another lamp, a photographic lamp or whatever they called this fucking shit, a box with a ‘cables 1’ label, another with a ‘cables 2’. She was wondering how many sequels this section had.

“She will be fucking out at school; her parents will hear gossip and shit.” Chloe started to feel the August heat and wiped her face with the front of her t-shirt. Somebody whistled at her, so she gave this person the finger. Politely. Damn, those kids. She showed a piece of bare flesh and they all got a boner. Fucking high schoolers.

Steph also could use a break, but was too occupied to stop right now.

“The school is far away from Seattle and her being out here is a big thing anyway. We will see how it goes. She didn’t take the fight with the principal very well. And parents...” She shrugged, dragging a coffee maker. “Well, you have no idea how often parents hear gossips they don’t want to believe in.”

“Max’s parents are nice. And very tolerant.” Chloe organized the mess on the ground, trying not to break anything and put the most important college machinery on top of the pile. No one could survive a year at Blackwell without a good coffee.

Steph finally stopped for a moment, panting heavily this time.

“Well, you know, parents’ tolerance is like being gay. They are tolerant until they not. Just like you were straight until one fucking magical evening and then oops, you weren’t. Simple as that.” She opened her hands in a helpless gesture and then passed Chloe a sound mixer, yet another, and damn, one more. The Vortex Club parties would get way more interesting with that kind of sound-system.

“I can’t really imagine them being against it. I haven’t talked to them for a long time but they were always pretty supportive.” Chloe sighed deeply seeing the first set of speakers coming into her direction.
“They are supportive in a way, but sometimes people prefer to stay clueless.”

They were done with speakers, a set of them to be specific. Steph looked at her palms, now red and scratchy, regretting not getting any work gloves. Chloe could care less, wondering if you could lift and smoke at the same time.

“Living a lie and dealing with a double life?”

“And you’re starting again.” Her friend rolled her eyes in a visible impatience. “You don’t have to hide anything anymore, you have the privilege of being as out as you want, but it’s not a given. Rachel got kicked out from her home even if her father was so tolerant, right?” And off to the dark guts of the trailer she went.

“She got kicked out because of different reasons.” Chloe yelled, not sure how much Steph would be able to hear.

They were in a music section now. A guitar, another guitar, a fucking drum. Somebody was starting a band here or something. She should start practicing again though. It would be nice to play the guitar from time to time.

“Maybe, but Rachel was homeless for quite a while. And it just proves my theory about amazingly tolerant parents going fucking crazy.” Steph gave a her a knowing look.

Chloe nodded, not finding any other argument against the statement, and hid her sweaty blue locks under her beanie. It was way too hot for that unpacking business, but she would never refuse to help.

“True.”

“I don’t remember not being out, but Max…” Here was the ‘kitchen’ carton. Why would somebody drag this all the way from Seattle? They had restaurants in Arcadia Bay. And pizza. Steph kept going with the explanation while moving back and forth. “She has this great relationship with her parents, but they are far, far away. She’s afraid that breaking the news to them now would be too much and could break the ties between them. For some people, it would be a relief just to drop their old mamas and papas a note and move away, but not for Max. She cares a lot.”

Chloe was sure that after the ‘kitchen’ they would start an ‘attic’ section, or ‘useless things from the basement’, maybe even a live dragon, but Steph was passing her just a simple, super heavy printer. It landed by the pile, who was the size of mount Everest already.

“She does care. Damn, Steph I had no idea.” Chloe groaned under the weight of yet another box, simply described ‘DND4’. The future got extremely substantial now.

“It’s fine, really.” The prequels of the previous package got passed, one by one. “She might never come out. Some people don’t, but they still deserve to be happy.”

They were almost done. Steph inspected the inside carefully, checking if they didn’t miss anything. Just before she jumped on the driver’s seat to re-park the U-haul, Chloe smiled and yelled. “I don’t worry about this aspect of her life.”

“Thanks!” She heard the response.

It didn’t take Steph long to pull over this beast to a more acceptable spot. She had to be used to big trucks, maybe it was a stage management set of skills or something. Chloe gloomily noted that everybody was better at parking than her, despite of vehicle size. She had a time for yet another smoke, breathing in and out fast, hoping to finish it this time.
Some girl winked at her checking her out. Chloe’s eyebrow rose in surprise, then in question, but then the stranger winked yet again along with a seductive look. The blue-haired pirate shook her head. She had to look terrible, with the sweaty shirt, wet hair, the smoke in the corner of her mouth, tense arm muscles and desperate gaze, hoping for this toil to end. She used the rest of the bottled water to pour on herself and knock the heat out. She hoped that splashing some liquid on her face would disgust and chase the creeper out, but this girl was still looking at her, now biting one of her fingers like a hungry animal.

What was wrong with those people today?

“So, what’s on your mind? Since you’re done with your Pantene commercial.” Steph appeared suddenly by her side, not entirely happy that there was no water left. “Another Netflix show you’re diving yourself in?”

“Well, Rachel.” Chloe decided not to lie, but still was flabbergasted by all the interest and attention she was getting from strange people around her. Instead of sending her sultry looks they could really help with this load and lift some boxes, damn assholes.

“That’s so obvious it’s painful.” Steph laughed shortly. “What’s it this time?”

They blocked the entrance door, creating a delivery path and started to drag the boxes, cartons, fucking tent and rest of the useless shit the girls had brought, up the steep stairs. They didn’t have the strength to continue talking at the moment, trying not to fall down or break anything. Chloe was way stronger, but Steph way faster. They began at the same time, but quickly they were passing each other on the steps, going back and forth to the parking lot.

“She wants me to visit her parents in Long Beach.” Chloe explained, when Steph passed her walking down the staircase. “Official. Scary. Might be explosive.”

“You’re lucky that Rachel wants to do it.” She heard a yell and then fast-paced steps behind her. “I don’t feel lucky.” She couldn’t turn back, but hoped Steph would hear her anyway. “I don’t even know if I will go. It seems forced.”

“It will always be.” Her friend exhaled heavily, maybe because of the damn unloading exercise, maybe because of the touched subject. “They dreamt about their little princess and model daughter having a little perfect life with an amazing husband and three kids, celebrity fucking style shit, training her the whole time to do magic TV tricks, and then she fucks them over with you.” They were back in the room. Steph was seriously exhausted. “Of course, they will hate you. You depraved their perfect daughter, you monster.”

They both wanted to be done with this, but gave up synchronously and sat on the comfy bed, drinking some water and calming their breaths.

“Guilty as charged. I really did that, huh?” Chloe smiled, recalling some depravation and planning up more.

“No, actually you didn’t.” Steph was still too tired to lift anything, even herself. “Rachel decided to be with you, you know, more than holding hands, so it’s not your fault. If you hadn’t acted on it, she would join the club sooner or later with somebody else. You didn’t make her gay, or whatever she wants to call it. But her parents probably think you did the magic rainbow trick and boom, goes the dynamite, Rachel Amber doesn’t like dicks anymore.”

Steph finally found some lost resources of inner power and got up. Chloe followed her without a
single complaint. “That would be a fucking powerful rainbow shit.” She added, and the face of Frank Bowers flashed for a moment in a painful memory. She shook it off.

“Straight up from a unicorn’s ass.” Her friend laughed again when running down the stairs. She looked pretty happy with this moving in thing. “You want my insight, or are we just chit-chatting?”

The couch was the worst thing, especially regarding the steep stairs. Chloe didn’t have a choice but to lift it and start walking in an awkward parade with Steph on the front. They almost crashed at the entrance, but pushed this damn thing through and started dragging it up to the second floor.

“Insight please.” Chloe really didn’t know why people needed furniture. It was so nice to sleep on the floor. “I always bend to the wise words of Gandalf the gay.”

“Oh, shut up.” Steph waved at her when they put the couch in the room and could speak like people, not two panting wearied dogs. “You have two fucking choices. First, you can leave it to Rachel and force her to talk about this almost non-existing person, this girlfriend of hers that is never around. Just leave it to beaver shit, not include yourself in this family photo. Not your circus, not your monkeys. Convenient. Or you can face them and try to convince them with your charming personality that you are an acceptable choice. To some extent. Less convenient.”

The stairs again. Chloe started to hate every step and giving each of them an ugly nickname. First was an asshole, then Nazi, dickhead, retard, Frank Bowers, fuck pig, cocksucker … And several profanities later they were outside again.

“Acceptable choice?” She murmured thanking the universe that only the light stuff was left. “It’s not even about having a dick or not. It’s the fact that I’m not from that social level or whatever the fuck they call it.”

“So?” Steph was also more than relieved. She grabbed the last two lamps, leaving Chloe with the damn framed photos. “It’s not your problem. It’s theirs. Rachel didn’t change your social status to punish her parents. Stop thinking so low of yourself.”

Going up, then the room, leaving stuff, then down. They were able to walk faster feeling the wind of hope and the job almost done. Chloe almost stumbled on the ‘Nazi’ step, and had to hold onto the handrail. Better this one than ‘Frank Bowers’, way more slippery.

“I just feel like a fucking obstacle.” She confessed during the next round.

“That’s how Rachel calls you?” Steph shook her head. She was still able to listen and give advice even if barely breathing.

“Of course not.” Chloe scoffed.

Some people passed them, two young artistic looking students sent her a smile. She stuck out her tongue, unable to perform any vulgar gesture with her busy hands. Steph passed her again, almost running. They had to take another break, otherwise they would both get a mental breakdown or just simply die.

Water, water, my kingdom for water!

“Can’t you just appreciate it and enjoy her courage?” Steph literally drank the whole bottle at once. “Rachel fights for you every day, and maybe even now. She really loves you, Price, and doesn’t seem afraid of being out. It’s rare, really. You have no idea how rare. I know you don’t give a fuck what people think, Rachel seems to share this view. Maybe not grasping it completely, but she wants to.”
The last round. Chloe was sure it was the last time she would have to walk those steps, then she remembered that she was practically living in this dorm now and cursed loudly.

“Fuck, I never expected Rach to be that fucking blunt about it. We’ve been together for like what... over 3 years now, and she’s been heralding it recently like all the fucking time.” The tent and the guitars were almost a pleasure to carry.

“Three years. Time flies, huh?” Her friend still had enough strength to smile.

They got to the room, done with lifting, moving and pushing stuff around. The space looked like a battlefield, and Chloe felt bad for the girls knowing how much time they would have to spend unpacking and organizing everything, but was very happy with the fact that she didn’t have to be involved with the next part. Rachel could help if she wished, no objection there.

“Damn right, it flies.” She focused to finish her thought. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful for everything she is doing. I really am.”

Steph looked at her t-shirt, entirely wet from sweat and dirty, then tried to find a clean one, but it was almost impossible in this mess, so she just gave up and sat on the floor. The bed was taken by all the boxes, packages and the fucking tent.

“Good.” She finally articulated. “What are you afraid of, Price? What could happen there anyway?”

“I dunno. I just don’t like the fact that this Long Beach trip seems so forced.” Chloe wanted to shrug but her shoulders had a different opinion about moving in general and simply decided not to. She was just left with an expressed impression. Always something.

Steph bowed her head, slowly putting herself together.

“She was forced anyway to stand in front of your parents and admit that she is in fact in love with you. She was asked directly and didn’t chicken out. Yeah, she told me.” She looked at Chloe. “Don’t you think it was fucking forced too? Did you hear her complaining?”

Chloe sat down by Steph’s side, speechless, tired, sweaty and done for today. She wouldn’t be able to lift anything for at least a week. Lack of movement turned on the turbo-speed on thinking, always switching to analytical-mode. Her friend was right. Rachel had never complained. She cried a few times and got angry of course, alright, but never vented about it, never questioned the status quo.

“So, you think I should go?”

Steph didn’t even have the strength to bump her arm in a friendly encouragement.

“I think you should do whatever you feel is good for you both. Everybody has their own game, Chloe. Everybody.”

***

Max got lost in the crowd once again. The school pulsated with excitement and anticipation, throbbing with yells and fast steps. The faces, familiar or not, were flashing, appearing and disappearing just in front of her, before she was able to react. The whole world around her was changing instantly, whirling in the infinite arrangement, pushing her away, kicking her out of the way. Get lost Max, you are not welcome here, you are not needed.

She was needed, despite of all the signs and the doubts she still had. Still confused on what to say, how much to tell, how to put all the pieces in order, how to make everything work as she planned.
How to forget the horrors.

Kate. She had to find Kate Marsh and introduce herself, start bonding, connecting. She had said too much already, she had to pick up with the reality, here, now, immediately. Confused about where to find her former and future friend, she was wandering through the busy hallways, trying to remember, to focus, to recall.

It was so fucking hard.

The thoughts in her head were melting, combining all the memories, sometimes so different and strange, into one big thaw pile of predictions, fears and unstoppable waves of a callous vision. She had to go outside, take a deep breath, calm herself down, calm her mind down.

When she finally reached the front yard, so grateful for the late summer breeze, her heart stopped for a moment, breath got uneven and she could swear the nosebleed would come in a second. Kate Marsh was sitting there on the grass, in the shadow of one the trees, calm and stress-free in the middle of all the orientation mess. An open book on her lap suggested she came here to relax in the bliss of the nature, but couldn’t pick a worse place, especially today. Max’s stomach squeezed in a grasp of sorrow. She missed her old friend, a friend who was still a stranger now, but it wasn’t the sight of Kate that made her terrified or the unsureness of how to start a conversation.

It was the company she was with.

Nathan Prescott was talking to Kate Marsh in front of Max’s eyes in a calming matter, tranquil, sweet and very supporting. Too supporting. His speech was bringing a small, shy smile on Kate’s face, even made her giggle a little bit. They almost looked like a charmed couple copied and pasted from a previous century painting, courting each other in the most old-fashioned way.

Max walked closer so she could listen.

“…It’s very interesting. Great idea, really!” Nathan almost put his hand on Kate’s shoulder, but blushed a little bit and his intention changed into an embarrassed wave. “We will have to talk more about it. Please give me a call if you would like to integrate more.” He got silent for a second, still with rose cheeks, then laughed shortly and shyly. “Don’t worry I don’t have anything… wicked in my mind, I’m just trying to be friendly.”

Kate smiled too, tilting her head to hide her timid sight. Max knew her too well, she was indeed content and pleasantly surprised by the reception of her ideas and the companionship itself.

“I know.” Kate whispered softly. “Thank you so much for your support, Nathan.”

The young Prescott was still acting like a true gentleman, looking at her with a fragile fascination. His eyes were bright and full of curiosity, but Max could swear there were some dark spots there, promising a dark termination for this relation, friendship or whatever they were planning on.

“I know, new school, new dorm, new people. It might be scary.” Nathan felt it was time to go, since this encounter was taking way too much time, but didn’t really want to part yet. This was way scarier than Max thought. “It will take time, but Blackwell is a really great place. I’m sure you will find a lot of new friends here.” Then Nathan spotted Max finally. He straightened up uncomfortably, taking it as a sign to leave. Good. She was pressing him to get the fuck out as soon as possible, with her piercing gaze aimed directly at him. “Ok, I have to go. See you soon, Kate!”

It was a soft promise, a vulnerable anticipation even. Everything Kate was attracted to. She didn’t know exactly how to react, not believing her own luck. First day at school and she just met this
awesome young guy, such a nice surprise. Everybody told her that only strange, mean and weird people were attending these art schools, but she knew it all had to be a lie.

“See you!” She said only, looking after him as he walked off fast. They exchanged yet another gaze promising to meet up soon, and it would be pretty damn charming, but it wasn’t.

Max finally got closer. It was time for her introduction, but she didn’t prepare one.

“Hi, I’m Max. Max Caulfield.” She stated, trying to be confident and friendly, hideously aware of how odd it sounded, almost like an old creepy James Bond joke. Fake confidence was never paying off for her, but Kate didn’t mock it up, reacting to everything occurring in her life with patience and care. She was truly a good person, a wonderful spirit.

“Kate Marsh. Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands shyly, then Max sat just beside her, preparing for a longer discussion. Kate gave her a peculiar look, unsure if that was exactly what they both needed at the moment, but didn’t run away. Yet.

“First day, right? Did you unpack and stuff?” Max desperately tried to remember how to talk to people who didn’t know her. She wasn’t used to it, she wasn’t good at it and never made any effort to improve. The whole situation was a huge step out from her comfort zone, drastically torn and ragged already.

“Not completely, but I managed.”

They couldn’t talk about unpacking any longer. That would give Max a migraine instantly, especially considering what she estimated to see in her room after getting back. She wasn’t keen on asking about religion, not really prepared and not sure how good it would go. Chatting about school classes seemed cliché and it could quickly escalate into warnings and riddles. What was Kate’s favorite thing? Oh.

“How is Alice? Does she like the new place?”

“How is Alice? Does she like the new place?”

“Alice?” Kate frowned, entirely baffled.

Alright, maybe she named her beloved animal differently. Maybe Max’s memory got clouded with errors and she screwed this up. But the name was Alice, it had to be Alice. Kate was still looking at her shocked and perplexed. Who the fuck was Alice, her gaze was asking, even if she would never use words that vulgar. Max got confused again, begging all the fates for a little bit more luck this time.

“Your rabbit?”

“A rabbit?” Kate’s eyes grew bigger.

“Yeah, you know... you have a rabbit, right?” This was not good. This was a disaster.

“No, I don’t. I never had one actually.” Kate smiled reservedly and shook her head. “I like to draw bunnies though.” She tried to help keep the conversation going, but grew too confused and distant. They both knew it would be way better just to stop there, but Max wasn’t ready to give up. Not yet anyway.

Kate was peering at her, not sure what to do. This weird girl with a deer on her shirt looked terrified, as if a potential non-existing bunny was a significant part of her reason to live. Everybody had told
her there were only strange, mean and weird people attending these art schools, and maybe there was some truth to it after all.

“Ah, I had to mistake you with somebody else.” Max mumbled, feeling a headache approaching her broadly. She touched her nose, a routine for her at the moment, just to check if everything was alright.

“Happens. First day, right?”

Awkward silence. Kate’s hands were on her book turning page after page nervously, giving Max an unspoken sign that she would prefer to read instead of talking. She would never tell her to go away, and getting up moving from her favorite spot would be rude and inappropriate. It was a strange encounter indeed and she missed Nathan by her side, hoping he would protect her from this eerie stranger. This girl looked nice, but her intense gaze was troubling somehow, like she knew more than she wanted to say. Was she mental or just some kind of artist?

No, it was wrong. Kate reprimanded herself quickly. She shouldn’t judge people through first impressions. It happened too often and it was a huge mistake. She didn’t want to be one of those people, who come to conclusions after a few words out of context. Max could be a good soul, a lost one, but Kate had no idea how to make this conversation effective.

“Well… I just wanted to say hi, since we are living on the same floor, I guess.” Max finally offered an explanation, why she wanted to talk to her in the first place. She aspired to ask about Nathan at first, but the situation got complicated already. Warning Kate right now would be even worse.

“Really? That’s awesome.” Kate relaxed a little bit. “Which room are you in?”

“219.” That was just across the hall. It meant they would see each other pretty often and it was completely understandable why Max would like to talk to her, even if she got confused with this rabbit thing. They might exchange notes or books in the future, meet in the corridor, discuss common problems. It was important to stay on good terms with the neighbors. First impressions were usually overrated anyway.

“The double one? Lucky you!” Kate smiled, trying to shrug off the weird inclination that there was something wrong with this girl. “I really wanted to share my room with somebody but there were only singles left. How is your roommate? Do you guys get along well?”

“Yeah, we do, it’s my girlfriend.” Max stated a little bit too proudly. She couldn’t help herself, but any mention of Steph, even a small one like right now, was making her heart beat a little faster. Kate’s reaction was baffling, to say the least.

“A girlfriend? Oh.” She got nervous, hiding her sigh looking at her book again. She didn’t want to judge, but this bold statement made her edgy. It wasn’t about her being tolerant or not, but Max caught her off guard, and she had never been in a similar situation before. The distress was even bigger with the fact that this girl was watching her every move and didn’t like her male company before.

Was this rabbit thing a hidden lesbian password or something? Was she testing her?

Max wanted the ground to open so hard right now. The whole conversation had to look like a very weird pickup line from the very beginning. She scared the guy who was interested in Kate, just to talk about bizarre animals, shared rooms and finished by throwing a gay confession into a religious girl’s face.
It was better to back off. For now. Max stood up, brushing off the grass from her pants, not sure how she should react. Preferring just to disappear in room no. 219, she made the last and final effort to communicate with her former and hopefully future friend: “So anyway, if you would like to grab a tea and bitch about life...”

“Sure, Max. Thank you.” Kate responded, extremely relieved that this meeting finally reached its end.

***

They tested the bed in the dorm room. Well, first the wall in the hallway, damn the tired shoulders, moving, lifting, pressing against the door. It almost ended in a disaster when Rachel whispered “inside” and Chloe was way too ahead with the interpretation of the demand. They heard some encouraging yells when they finally opened the damn room and could slam the door behind them. That was the inside Rachel talked about. Fuck the Ray Bans, they were left in the hallway as well as Chloe’s jacket. Undressing a movie star was a surprisingly easy task, getting out from the sweaty clothes was way more complicated. Then the moan, touch, breath, fast, faster, moan again, the end of the world, slowing down, another moan, damn, hard, they were loud, oh fuck, and that was it. For now.

It was remarkable how much energy Chloe was able to find inside of her human self when those amazing hazel eyes were looking at her begging for a next kiss.

It was a comfortable bed after all. They almost fell asleep for a moment, but the day was still young and Blackwell was summoning them back. They kicked the laziness in the stomach, changed clothes, wishing they had a private shower on the site, kissed more, almost repeating the whole procedure, wall included, and finally got back to the main building.

School sucked, Chloe decided. Well, it did, but it didn’t.

“You know we didn’t have to come here and look at this shit because everything is online.” She said when they finally stood in front of the huge board, covered with all the numbers, names, classes, rooms and all the important information every student was afraid of. They could check the schedule here if the whole world got drawn into darkness without internet or any other possible source of information. Blackwell was still displaying it every year, but less and less people wanted to check their classes in person, although some of them were treating it as a weird and important ritual of the beginning of the year.

“I know, but it’s like a high school tradition to go to this wall of tears and check how miserable you will be for the next few months.” Rachel responded. Oh, so she was indeed one of those people. Of course, she loved rituals, she just finished one in the room.

Yet another girl looked at one of them with a pleasant smile. Chloe turned around, growled with irritation and dragged Rachel closer. It was welcomed with an angry hiss, since it made her girlfriend almost drop her pen. Damn, she was really writing those things down.

“You just wanted to check out the fresh meat.” She murmured to Rachel’s ear still thinking about the dorm room testing procedure. Those annoying people who kept looking at her, at them both, were playing on her nerves.

She was possessive, alright? Everybody had some flaws.

“Maybe.” Rachel was still in a playful mood, and then winked at her. “Oh, don’t give me the stink eye. The fact that I already ordered my meal and even consumed it with pure pleasure doesn’t mean I
can’t look at the menu.” She stole a kiss and got back to writing.

“Are you checking out the boys or the girls?” It was supposed to be a humorous inquiry. It wasn’t.

“What do you think?” Rachel was checking out the calendar at the moment, but suddenly she grew thoughtful again and way more drowned in her notes than before. Chloe watched her carefully, sensing how hard it was for her to actually admit a thing or two in public. Some things should be admitted personally first though, but it was a different duty, a hard task, and the blue-haired trouble didn’t want to push Rachel too hard. She gained some wisdom this morning, while lifting half a fucking dorm room out of a truck, and drew some conclusions.

The board was a safe territory.

“Fuck, Rachel.” She gasped following her girl’s number. “Will you have time for me at all? You were hella serious about this pre-law program. Business Law, Constitutional Law, International Law.”

“And homicide.” Rachel leaned on her still scrabbling notes. Her schedule looked dangerously busy and impressive at the same time.

“It will be a dark year for you, my love.” Chloe shook her head and followed her lead, reading her own stuff. Rachel already did it and noted everything for both of them. This was a serious business, rich with a lot of distress, and she wanted them both to be prepared and ready as fuck.

“Darker for you.” She grinned. “I see chemistry, physics and integrated science. I would die with those classes, but I see the potential in this torment.”

The spark in Chloe’s eyes was new, unknown and unseen before. She was looking at the displayed info, not really reading, but thinking about something intensely. Maybe it was time to really get serious, to really push herself harder, finally proving that Rachel wasn’t the only one who cared. She cared damn too much now and it would be nice to pay her back. For both of them.

“Thank you. Maybe I’m not a terrible mistake after all.” She murmured, and then noticed Mrs. Grant walking slowly into her lab room. “Rach, I will have to leave you for a moment. I have some school business to take care of.”

“Oh, that’s new.” A light frown was the only response. “How long will it take?”

“Five minutes or a couple of hours, depending on my luck.” She kissed her head almost ready to pull off and run after the teacher. “Don’t get lost in your menu.”

Rachel stopped her in place. She didn’t want to investigate, but old habits die hard. “I will try, although the appetizers look nice.” Starting with a distraction was a well-known strategy. “What are you planning this time?”

“Something impressive I guess. I hope.” Chloe looked at her chaotic notes nervously, tapping her notepad fast, too fast, in a school stress that Rachel had never seen before in her life. Her girl apparently didn’t have time to respond to any questions or give any insight, so the blonde just shrugged with a deep sigh. When Rachel turned around, she noticed principal Wells watching them carefully. This asshole loved to observe the students like it was a fucking zoo.

Rachel would give him a zoo.

“Hey, you forgot something.” She stopped Chloe once again, grasping her shirt, bringing her closer and shut up her impatient gasp with a passionate kiss. It was hard not to drop her pen and notes but
she managed somehow, still pulling her girl’s hair, biting her lip, pressing her close and scratching her back. It was probably the most fervent thing she had ever done in public, being completely sober.

Somebody clapped, somebody gasped, somebody else cheered. The principal didn’t even blink, still watching like it was the most natural and common thing to see in Blackwell Academy’s hallway. Rachel would make sure it would be, she was damn certain of it.

When they broke off, Chloe was very close to visit the dorm room again. Then she noticed the principal, and laughed loudly understanding the reason behind yet another statement. “Rachel Amber. Always playing with fire,” she said in her best Principal Wells imitation. “Only when it’s not busy being impressive.” Her girlfriend smiled, letting her go and getting back to her notes like nothing really happened.

Take that, Blackwell.

***

When the door to the chem-lab opened with a light creak, filling the space with a hollow echo, Mrs. Grant lifted her sight in disbelief. She didn’t expect anybody else to bother her anymore. It was a long day and she really wished to be left alone. Dealing with a stream of parents, young kids, older kids, demanding kids and annoying faculty was exhausting despite her broad experience. She was more than done for today. Her surprise grew bigger when she recognized the unexpected guest.

“Hello, Mrs. Grant.” Chloe was balancing between humble respect and blunt confidence, trying to find the right tone and not to offend anybody.

“Chloe? Chloe Price?” Her teacher took off her reading glasses. “Welcome. I didn’t expect to see you…”

“… At all?” Chloe choked. “It’s all right, I didn’t really plan to get back to school. And now here we are.”

It was a nice surprise indeed. Mrs. Grant was pleasantly astonished with this visitation, not sure if it was a good or bad omen and what kind of troubles she would have to deal with in the nearest future. Chloe looked nervous though, in this familiar way when students wanted to ask for something but didn’t know how.

“What can I help you with?” She decided to aid, being more and more intrigued.

Chloe took a deep breath, closed her eyes and started to speak extremely fast. “I know it’s super late and probably all the classes are already filled, but I would really like to attend some advanced science electives, if possible.”

It was probably the most surprising orientation day in Blackwell’s history. The most surprising for Mrs. Grant for sure. “I’m happy to hear that, Chloe. What subject?” She responded keeping a watchful teacher’s eye on her, playing with her reading glasses.

“Chemistry and Physics.” The blue-haired confusion took of her beanie, then put it back, then took off again not sure which custom would be more appropriate.

“On what level?”

Chloe grew a little pale, but responded firmly. “AP.”

The silence in chem-lab was always a little bit weird, cold and tasted like an oxygen. The invisible
drops of water from a forgotten faucet were slowly marking some metal sink in a steady, simple rhythm. AP classes were the hardest, the most ambitious, way beyond honors chemistry and physics. It was a lot to ask for, especially in her situation. Chloe bowed her head, waiting for a decision. A verdict.

Mrs. Grant couldn’t be more stunned. She reached her limit in being shocked for the next ten years or even more. She remembered this kid getting her first scholarship, smoothly solving any kind of science problem appearing on the blackboard, then the famous fall, absences, dropping out. And here she was again, covered with tattoos, piercings, rugged clothes but still interested in her favorite classes.

“You are exceptionally talented but your grades in the previous years...” The teacher didn’t want to kill her enthusiasm, but didn’t have a choice.

“...Were terrible. I know, I’m sorry.” Chloe nodded fast. “I just wanted to know if there is a chance. It’s my senior year.”

Senior year? Time flew fast indeed. Mrs. Grant leaned her chin on her fist thinking intensely. The girl would have to work very hard and make up for all the lost time, but if she would be very dedicated, why not to try? Chloe was always very talented, she had the right mindset and the only thing she was always lacking was motivation. It came back somehow, she really wanted to do good, do better. Impress. Hmmm…

“It’s really encouraging seeing a talent like you coming back and asking for more.” Mrs. Grant started slowly, giving her a knowing look. “You are requesting a lot, Chloe Price. It’s not standard procedure and I would have to stretch out the reality here but...” It was risky to give her the chance, but the world needed fearless scientists after all. “I might be able to manage something. There is a space in a class for sure though. The art schools don’t attract that many science geeks anyway, but you would have to take an additional test.”

If she was expecting Chloe to be scared and back off because of some papers, she was mistaken.

“I understand. I’m prepared.” The blue-haired girl nodded, smiled even. She obviously predicted something similar and seemed… glad. Chloe Price was glad to take a test. The world was ending.

“Even now?” Mrs. Grant had different plans for today’s afternoon, but she couldn’t help herself. Chloe probably would like to schedule it for next week anyway.

“Yeah.” No rescheduling.

The teacher sighed and shook her head in flamed amazement. She would have to change her plans, but it was worth it. It was worth seeing it today and she wished all high school dropouts would ask her for as much as this girl just had.

“Alright then.” She got up to prepare the tests. “I really hope you didn’t write any formulas between those tattoos of yours. Let’s start with Coulomb’s law then…”

***

An afternoon after a busy and productive day, spiced up with some tempting kisses and decent battles always tasted like cinnamon and satisfaction. Rachel walked around, recalling all the memories, good, bad and great, enchanted in the academy’s walls. She talked with some people she once had known, not to test her charm this time, but just plainly enjoying the conversation.

Being here again felt strange and amusing at the same time. Her shoulders were aching, while she
stretched. A sign of time effectively spent. It was time to go home, eat something, stretch more, take a shower, drink a beer or two, celebrate more. Rachel smirked lightly, when her thoughts traveled to Chloe yet again. She remembered herself wandering through those hallways and crushing so hard on this unknown stranger, the fearless badass, who hadn’t given any fucks about anything. That still didn’t change, damn it.

Chloe was still busy with her secret school thing, so it was about time to put this room to use, lay down and read a little. She crossed the gates and started to walk faster towards the girls’ dorm. It was getting dark, but the construction workers were still digging around trying to erect some billboards. Rachel saw them earlier preparing for some kind of extensive job, but she didn’t expect a photo exhibition. Some of the grass had been demolished already when they kept digging the deep, wide holes. It almost looked like a graveyard, a secret stash for murdered victims. She smiled lightly at the morbid thought. The homicide class was already playing on her vivid imagination.

“Rachel. Rachel, wait.” She turned around just to see Nathan Prescott running after her. It wasn’t her vivid imagination this time. She kept ignoring him, but he kept coming back. Now, he was just by her side, panting lightly. “How is your day going?” Nathan asked awkwardly, not sure how to start the conversation just after the chase.

She didn’t want to give him any chances of false hopes. She was done with him, with the whole Vortex Club anyway. Rich kid or not, his presence was annoying and unwanted. “It has been great, till now.” She snapped and tried to walk off.

“Listen. Listen!” He didn’t give up. “I just wanted to say sorry for this thing at the diner. And every other shit.”

Rachel looked at him finally, not up for another fight. He sounded sincere or learned how to lie at last. His movements were less nervous, on the contrary, his eyes not filled with madness. Maybe he was on meds, maybe he finally found his peace. It would be great, for everybody’s sake.

She should investigate and ask him some questions, regarding his sudden change, but it was a long day, evening almost. It was better to start fresh tomorrow, prepare, ask around and then continue this talk.

“Oh yeah?” Rachel responded, way harsher than she intended, hoping to leave him behind. “Well, apologies accepted. Have a nice evening.”

One thing hadn’t changed for sure. He was always annoying and picking the worst possible times to talk to her. Nathan was indeed following her, step by step, trying to keep up with her pace. He reached her arm and stopped her again, pushing lightly.

“Rachel, please. We’ve been good friends.” He almost begged.

So, Rachel stopped, and turned to him. She knew he had a crush on her and was still under the impression that there could be something more between them. It had always been troubling and she had to stop it. Now would be great, if possible.

“We’ve been great stoners, not friends.” She explained calmly, sensing the tension rising. “I’m sorry I don’t really have time for a confession or a hateful speech. I’ll take a rain check if you don’t mind.”

“I’m really sorry, I will try better.” He nodded, but missed the whole meaning behind her words. Rachel groaned with resignation. She would have to deal with this guy for one more year. It would be better to act civil and not start any fights, but his stubbornness was extremely exasperating.
Nathan desperately tried to find something he could rely on, a snippet of their past, a common thing he could use and he finally found one. “You know, if you want to get stoned again or party hard I can arrange that.”

“Not interested. I’m done with that shit.” She hissed. She didn’t want to be forced to remember the fucking time when she had been in fact a junkie, a night creature without a past, present and future. She gained all those things back though. He could go fuck himself.

“Really? You? Since when?”

She was so close to slap him, recalling all the times he had seen her high, stoned and humiliated by every single pharmaceutical wonder he was bringing to the parties. He had seen her worst moments and that was yet another reason Rachel really wanted to hit him hard, to crash his nose, make him bleed and to take revenge. For all those stubborn questions, inclined assumptions and her own stupidity. Nathan Prescott represented everything bad in her life, every terrible mistake and he should be punished.

He grabbed her shirt, reading her mind and preparing for a violent outcome. Amber, what the fuck, she wanted to yell at herself. Not even the first day and she was about to get into trouble again.

“What is going on here?” A low male voice stopped the fight before it started. They stepped back at the same time, bowing their heads in a fake shameful gesture, as scolded kids caught in the act. It was part of the unwritten school rules and they were good players after all.

“Mr. Jefferson… We were just talking.” Nathan was first to respond.

Rachel lifted her head rapidly. That was the teacher Max had told her about. Mark Jefferson, the horror himself. She expected a scruffy, weird, lumping creep, but this guy was handsome, well-groomed and was moving with a lot of grace. Rachel was sure a lot of girls had a crush on him. The ultimate hot teacher fantasy, a successful professional, who protected lonely girls in the front yard.

Jefferson looked at her with curiosity but walked to the young Prescott instead, ready to reprimand him. “Seems like you should stop talking for now. You should control yourself more, Nathan.” He stated. Both men were looking at each other in silence, as if an internal communication was taking place, a hidden dialogue or telepathic interchange. Rachel watched their silent struggle with fascination, crossing her arms on her chest with a defensive gesture and wondering where it was leading.

Mark Jefferson was indeed an interesting member of the faculty. It was so hard to believe he could be a real danger, a predator, a criminal even, but Rachel didn’t really doubt Max’s words. Successful men could be dangerous in many ways; she had learned that lesson in a hard way. Damn, it would be nice to investigate more about this one though.

The tension was rising, and then it fell down speedily, like nothing had happened. Nathan bowed his head one more time.

“I will control myself better. I will. Sorry, Mr. Jefferson. Sorry, Rachel.” He added and walked away as fast as he could. The teacher nodded and headed to the main building, ignoring her existence whatsoever and leaving her alone with her questions and unexpressed gratefulness.

That was probably the weirdest fucking thing Rachel had experienced today.

***

Chloe found her girl outside, sitting on the bench in front of the dorm. She jumped over the seat,
dragged her closer to her chest, letting her lean on her. Rachel made herself comfortable, cuddling more. She heard a lighter clicking and the smell of freshly burnt tobacco filled the air. Smoking was not allowed here, but no one would care. It was late afternoon, the golden hour of the day transitioning into the night.

“So how did the impressive stuff go?” Rachel asked after a kiss, surrounded by the presence she missed. A piece of paper was passed to her hands. She folded the crumpled note and her eyes grew bigger. “You’re… really into… it now.” She stuttered in shock seeing her girlfriend’s name, an obvious fucking ‘A’ circled in the right corner, Mrs. Grant’s famous signature, and confirmation of getting AP classes. Two AP classes. Two super fucking hard and intense AP classes. The blue-haired pirate and the college credit? How did it happen?

Randomly, Rachel got scared. She got so scared her girl would change, abandon this rebel without a cause image completely, transition into a good girl, from day to night, lose her fangs, becoming somebody else, somebody unknown, a stranger. She was shocked and so damn fucking proud of course, but she didn’t wanna lose her pirate.

Chloe inhaled deeply with a broad smile. No extreme change was coming anytime soon.

“I don’t want to disappoint your father. And you.” She stated finally, seeing Rachel growing to the point of being speechless, and that was a golden achievement in itself.

Mentioning James Amber was always sobering her girlfriend up. She stole her smoke for a moment, inhaled and gave it back.

“In that order? Interesting. And you could never disappoint me.” Rachel was hoping Chloe would do well, she just didn’t expect her to do exceptionally well. “Now I’m fucking impressed.”

“Well, fuck, you should be.” Chloe was pretending she didn’t care, still smoking slowly. Rachel was looking at this piece of paper as if she had never seen one before. It wasn’t the thing Chloe really wanted to talk about, not used to be praised on her academic abilities. “You know we never really attended school together?” She asked.

“Since I got into your pants?” Rachel put the paper in her jeans’ pocket. She would frame this fucking thing one day. Un-fucking-believable.

“Yeah. Pants, heart, every thought.” Another smooth exhale. Chloe’s chest was moving up and down with a steady breath, so calming and reassuring after the hectic day. Rachel could hear her heartbeat, loved the sound so much. She snuggled more into her arms, which was very much appreciated.

“True. What’s your point?”

Somebody passed them, looking at Chloe with an extreme interest, so Rachel just sent this person a murderous gaze. This one was hers, back off, dickhead. She was leaning on this girl anyway, marking her and imprinting. This asshole could dream on and fuck off.

Chloe didn’t even notice.

“Rach… I know you are fearless and shit, but you have to be careful sometimes. People can be fucking mean to you and stuff.” She sighed. The talk with Steph made her recognize more dangerous, weirder possible outcomes and she didn’t want her girl to struggle with the high school reality. “I hella love what you’re doing, but some assholes may not be nice. You act like you don’t care, but it’s not true. I don’t want you to force yourself.” She finished awkwardly, not sure if she
expressed her concern in a proper way. Using the word ‘gay’ or the term ‘being out’ would be hazardous, so she gawkily tried to say it by not saying. Rachel could put this ‘reading her mind’ thing to use in the right moment sometimes, not only in the most uncomfortable times.

“Always so fucking protective.” Her girl smiled, and stole her smoke yet again. “Don’t worry, I know how to deal with people, mean people especially. I promised to make out with you on every lunch break and I will keep this promise.”

“You just want to turn on Victoria Chase, admit it.” Chloe scoffed, but with an undertone of a delight and joy. The fashion snake would start to stutter way more by the end of the year.

“That wasn’t my original plan, but it will be fun as well.” Rachel confirmed with a knowing smile. “I’m not gonna hide you anymore. I should’ve never hidden you in the first place.” She added softly.

The old janitor, almost as old as Blackwell itself, the definition of the school’s essence and its serene spirit, started to sweep off the front yard’s paths. He didn’t say a word about them smoking, cleaning up the ash along with leaves, empty snacks’ packages and trashed school fliers. The student crowd locked down in the building behind them seemed not vital, like a nightmare, a bad dream, a different world they all didn’t belong to. Samuel was making the dorm’s muffled noise even less important, providing something they would call peace. But they were young, passionate and rebellious, so peace wasn’t a word that would come to their minds.

He made the place feel special though. Rachel always liked the old guy.

“Hi Samuel, how are you today?” She greeted him, not changing her position.

He responded with a single bow and sincere smile. His eyes, hidden behind the thick surface of his glasses brightened up with gladness, but then darkened in sorrow. “It was a beautiful day. It’s sad it’s almost over.” He said, not responding to the actual question. It was part of his charm after all. “The new beginning, the dark beginning.”

“I wouldn’t say it better.” Chloe smiled, finishing her smoke, but to respect his hard work she didn’t throw it out on the pavement, keeping in her hand instead. Being careless would be too rude even for her right now.

“Samuel can see and hear things.” He was still there, sweeping, even if the path looked more than clean now. “The song of the future is here, whispered by the sacred trees.”

The trees whistled quietly, just in the right moment, confirming his words. Maybe the branches had been moving all the time, but neither Rachel nor Chloe had noticed before, focusing on the next touch and kiss instead.

“What do they tell you about us?” Rachel asked, captivated by the magic moment and still leaning on Chloe’s chest. It was one of the carefree instants she would remember for the rest of her life.

Samuel’s hand stopped, when he sighed deeply, concentrating, listening, thinking. People were asking him about their fates all the time, mostly to mock him or joke about it later, but he was always taking the requests seriously.

He raised his head, and looked at Chloe.

“You can become everything. And you…” He pointed at Rachel, now sad and concerned. “You can become no one.”

Rachel’s smile disappeared at once. Her girlfriend cuddled her closer, protective and sensitive as
always. The blonde recalled today’s encounter with Mark Jefferson, and Max’s warnings rang inside her head screaming in alarm. She got scared again, holding onto her girl, trying to mute those ugly thoughts in her mind. It didn’t work out. “Hold me,” she whispered, and she got what she needed.

“Always insightful. Thank you, old man.” Chloe saluted Samuel, finishing the short talk. Her attention went back to Rachel full-time again.

They kept sitting on the bench for quite a while. Not speaking, just feeding on each other’s presence, the warmth of a flannel shirt, the common breath, shielding themselves from the ugly truths, foul past and present, the unknown future. The night was generous in giving them chills, but the frozen moment was just simply too good to break, to change, to do anything else but be together right now and right here.

“Rach?”

“Yeah?” She responded.

Chloe shifted a little. Her arm was getting numb, but she would never complain. It was just a plain excuse to wake herself up, sober up from the magical laziness and get to the business she thought about for some time.

“Is this Long Beach thing still actual?”

Rachel lifted her head, trying to look at her. “This one including my father feeding you with his policies about how the world should work now?”

“Yeah. And chicken a ‘la king on my shirt and in my hair.” Her girlfriend brushed off a piece of ash from her jacket, recalling some shattered glass and the salad she would remember for the rest of her poor punk life. It could explain her aversion to tomatoes though.

“Hella actual.” Rachel nodded, slipping her fingers between Chloe’s, playing with her hand as always when she was awaiting a response but was afraid to ask. Her girl didn’t leave her hanging for long, gripping her hand lightly.

“Would you mind booking two tickets, not just one?”

Rachel held her breath for a second, then another one. She didn’t expect a positive reaction to her troubling invitation, hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst. It was another shocking surprise, a true wonder. She wouldn’t have to face them alone. She would be with her. At last.

California beaches got way more beautiful immediately.

“You are really that brave.” She whispered.

Chloe shook her head, not shyly this time. The spark of real confidence, a real rebel’s trigger appeared, when she responded softly: “No, but I really love you.”
Victoria Chase pushed the heavy glass door and walked into her dorm hallway, superior, proud and straightened, armed with her watchful gaze. It was her kingdom, with its flaws and glitches, snags and delights, despicable hillbillies and decent, hardworking followers. It was her social maze populated by dozens of peasants and a small group of aristocracy, and she didn’t hold any doubts which group she belonged to. This mob was difficult to discipline sometimes, to direct and force her way on them, but she had been working hard all the time and succeeded consequentially. Patience had paid off with sweet grasps of control.

When she was walking to her room observing everybody attentively, she did what a leader was supposed to do. She was examining and reviewing all her commonwealth: the weak and the strong links of the chain, the human real estate Victoria had fought so hard to govern.

The first dark den she had to pass by was the outcast section, infamous room 224. Amber and Price, the fallen princess and the blue fucking trash occupied this place, to her misery and disgust. “Yes... Rachel... Yes... Fuck.” She could hear them now, just stepping slowly not really eavesdropping. Damn, Price couldn’t fucking shut up, always had to exhibit how much she appreciated her dyke convention every possible morning. And then she heard fucking Amber’s excited voice: “I’m here, come for me, baby.” Oh no, you didn’t, bitch. Victoria rolled her eyes. Were they really doing it right now, or had they recorded it some time ago, now replaying it to piss everybody off? Intimate situations were called intimate for a reason, and the whole dorm would appreciate some decent modesty.

The wicked couple didn’t even try to hide anything, not taking examples from everybody else, adding an annoying meaning to this ‘out and proud’ term, making proclamation after proclamation whenever they were alone. Thankfully they didn’t stay here very often, dosing their vocal announcements only a few times a week, but it was more than Victoria was willing to bear. Those two should be kicked out from the dorm and get back to the dark dungeon they had come from. She really should contact principal Wells about this abhorrent situation. Price crashing here was against school rules anyway, and Victoria was generous enough not to report them, but her patience had its limits.

The only sound from 217, the boring house of handmaids, was some loud dance music, not even this month’s hot-playlist, but some old eighties hits. It meant Stella Hill woke up already and was trying to cover her unattractive face with tons of foundation, encouraging herself by the outdated tune. She was harmless though, almost invisible crawling in between floor boards, easy to squash if needed.

218, a garden of friendship, a welcoming place for Victoria, was closed and silent. Dana Ward was probably awaiting her in the operation center, steadfastly working on today’s event. That made the empress smile for the first time this morning. Somebody was taking their responsibilities seriously at last.

223, the silent backstage of drama club, was Juliet’s room. The poor girl had to put up with those obnoxious loud fuckwits, living wall-to-wall with Amber and her company, who by the way, still hadn’t finished. The room was empty, it looked like the Shakespearian girl decided to take a break from the concert of pleasure and dove into the shower instead. It was valuable information. People in the bathrooms tended to be easy and vulnerable targets. Victoria didn’t plan a fight with Juliet, but maybe she would examine this girl’s true intentions if the window of opportunity would still be open, cornering her between steam and towels.

222, the holy virginity department inhabited by religious Kate Marsh, an unpleasantly annoying nun
who should follow her path to a convent instead of trying an art college. A small irritating obstacle, who tried to force them into abstinent clubs and evening prayers, not really aware of where she had landed. Kate would have to be disciplined as well, or maybe corrupted. Everybody could be corrupted one way or another, Victoria knew a thing or two about it. “Ave María, grátia plena, Dóminus tecum. Benedícta tu in muliéribus…” The modest girl was trying to mute out every other sound with a rosary in Latin. She should be on board with banishing Amber and her little fuck-toy from their sweet residence, becoming an unusual ally in the abolishing campaign against them. It would be indeed a true favor from the Lord and savior.

Victoria noticed Nathan, who was sitting by the window in front of Kate’s door, humming to himself the famous tune from “The Sound of Music”, browsing his notes, looking at his watch and peering at the room’s entrance. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, knowing that young Prescott invested a lot of time and effort in the relation with Kate Marsh, with his motives unclear. It was still a mystery why he would do it, minding the fact that the girl was innocent and wasn’t planning to change it for years into the future. Maybe he liked to play with it, finding it alluring, or was simply taking it as a challenge. She would have to talk to him seriously and demand an explanation. Nathan seemed way too thrilled than he should be waiting for this Bible basher. Victoria passed him without a single word or gesture of greeting.

Steph Gingrich was trying to open the door to yet another gay nest on the floor, the nerd tower number 219. She was balancing dangerously, trying to hold her notes, a tea mug and a bowl of soup, reaching for the handle at the same time. Victoria crinkled her nose smelling garlic. Unapologetic. The nerdy weirdo looked at her, maybe counting for help, but Victoria just smiled with a fake understanding, not intending to fall that low. People usually had two hands and a brain, it would be helpful if they started to use all of their magical limbs at the same time. Steph finally gave up, put all her stuff on the floor, pushed the door in, and vanished inside saying: “Baby, I’m here! I have the chicken soup for you.” The specific menu indicated that Caulfield was sick. Not good. It could complicate things, not to mention they could both spread a possible epidemic.

Victoria didn’t like complications, she had to overcome too many in recent times and dealing with coughing people weren’t on her to-do-list. Those two even if occupying the best room on the floor, were neutral and not interesting. Unfortunately, their connection to the outcast couple was very strong, so they might be a huge hindrance when Amber and her blue pipsqueak would get kicked the fuck out. It would require more preparation.

The last section, was room 220, a forbidden land of buzzing drones and movies that no sane person would like to watch. Brooke Scott knew a few things about computers and that was giving her peace from the rest of the dorm habitants. Everybody needed a geek from time to time especially when their laptops stopped working or their chargers got lost.

Victoria looked around one more time with her vigilant gaze. It was her kingdom, it was her place to rule, but somehow deep-down she knew it was a fucking zoo.

She left the public space walking into her perfectly arranged room, knowing she had to face yet bigger issues, organizing and managing. That was her duty that she was proud of, but her efforts were incredibly underestimated. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling though. Victoria had always tried to do better, striving for perfection and being ignored or mocked. It was her right get payback, to play on their nerves and force them all to keep up with her pace. Some of the fellow students just didn’t get it, not settling for anything better for themselves or the academy, so they earned to be hidden from her world, not even deserving to breathe the same air. Most people oddly wasted their opportunities and chances she had given them, and then came up crying asking for her mercy. She couldn’t stand it. Do it or don’t, there is no try, lazy assholes. And nerds, damn it.
Her room was already occupied. She could see all hands on deck, hard work, real dedication to the common goal. Dana and Taylor despite of the early hour were going through notes, texting, calling and writing stuff down, acting professionally and accountable. She had taught them well and was content of her accomplishments.

“Hello ladies, how was your morning.” She greeted them, still pleasantly smiling. They nodded, exchanging small ‘hellos’ and got back to work. The Vortex Club party required a lot of preparations, phone calls and confirmations, and it was good to see that they took it seriously. It was one of the most important events of the school year, the introduction to the inner circle, an opportunity to review any potential members and remove enemies. It was always a mixture of entertainment and high-speed tension. Just like the empress liked it.

“Oh Victoria, so good to see you. We are going crazy with organizing and stuff. You really have to help us.” Taylor sighed deeply. Victoria answered with a serious nod and took her spot by the desk, waiting for reviews and reports.

“That’s why I’m here, Taylor. Let me see.” She was given some papers. Catering, alcohol permissions, some signatures requested. She would take care of it later, easy-peasy. “Do you have the list of guest, Dana?” Yet another paper was passed to her hands almost at once. She read the names quickly, then stopped, frowning in disbelief. “Rachel Amber? Really? Do you want her to ruin the whole thing?”

The girls seemed confused, avoiding her gaze. Rachel was liked and adored by many, even despite of her recent developments. Victoria stood up and started walking around the room in a temperate and calculated pace. The only thing she wanted was for Amber with her homo attitude and stupid comments to get all the attention, especially from the college guys, always thirsty for girl-on-girl action. She had had game before, constantly competing and winning her social queen’s crown, but recently she became reckless and unpredictable. Victoria didn’t like unpredictable, she was allergic to it.

“Isn’t she officially still a member of the club?” Taylor was also waiting with her pen prepared to scratch Amber off the guest list. One big fat black line and the princess would be out.

“It’s nothing official about this dyke now.” Victoria shrugged, not giving a direct response. Not asking Rachel to come or just excluding her could turn into an ugly fight, unnecessary and very much unwanted at the most important party. “I feel for her, really. She had class and some style once, certainty not reaching my level, but not bad. She’s showing her real face now and this reckless fucking slut is getting too loud.”

“Very loud. It’s hard not to hear.” Dana choked knowingly. Those fucked-up lesbians evidently had woken up the whole dorm. Rainbow flag or not, it was an obligation to stop it.

“She’s a good sport and knows how to party. We could lose an opportunity to get some decent new Vortex members if she won’t be there. Rachel always attracts interesting people.” Her friend kept defending this slut. Victoria groaned silently. Dana always had a boner for Amber, adoring her like crazy a few years back. Some stupid crushes didn’t die that hard.

Rachel Amber’s popularity faded out though, she never got her fame back fully, despite the amount of sweat and determination. Recently she seemed disconnected from Blackwell’s crowd, focusing on her adventure with Price, but there were still a lot of people who existed only to feed their hungry eyes on her sight. On the other hand, the Vortex mayhem would be an opportunity to slip something in her drink or ask Nathan to do so, and enjoy a junkie-fallen princess’ performance that would throw everybody off once and for all. That was an idea Victoria could relate to and smile at. “Keep her.” She ordered.
“We don’t have to invite Chloe Price, if you don’t want to.” Tyler offered, with her pen still ready. This girl really liked to scratch people out.

“Chloe Price has to be on the list, and we all know it. Unfortunately.” Victoria scoffed, knowing very well how the latest expansions changed the social status of Rachel’s blue trash. “I hope she will wear something nice and clean regarding the occasion. I have no idea why Amber picked her, such a fucking disaster.”

“Not a disaster in every matter, judging by the noises.” Dana giggled again. Her laugh and Taylor’s slight smirk made Victoria concerned. First acceptance and then admiration? It was going too far already. They were just screwing for fuck’s sake, there was nothing to respect, but apparently some people didn’t mind praising them for it.

“Chloe got some game lately.” Taylor murmured and put her pen down.

“I know, that’s why we are keeping her.” The main manager and the president of the club shook her head, furiously shivering her blond bangs. “I don’t really dig this gay stuff though. Amber was always dick hungry, at least it seemed that way.” Victoria stopped her office walk, putting a finger on her lips, thinking. Planning. “I’m wondering if her rich and famous parents know about this.”

Taylor laughed loudly. “Victoria, you bitch. You want to tell them about it?”

“Why not. I’m not the one who decided to be an out-dyke shit.” She shrugged and smiled, typing something on her phone. Scheduling. If the Price-Amber duo was gonna go all lesbo this evening she would make sure to send some sweet note to their terribly uniformed parents or post some fruity video online. The internet was invented for some reason, and Rachel shouldn’t be in this dorm, she wasn’t in college. She should get back and hide in Price’s garage or wherever else this dirty punk had kept her before.

“Anyway, what about this Steph girl. She is playing a nurse for her girlfriend again. Another fucking lesbo drama. Did you confirm with her?” She asked, still planning her payback. It was nice to have something exciting going on. Amber would get got after all.

“It’s tough.” Taylor sighed. “She wanted to cancel, but since we signed the contract, she couldn’t back off. She might be not happy, but promised to deliver everything.”

“Good.” Contracts were Victoria’s newest advantage. Everything had to be on paper and it helped to sort stuff out. Steph would have to be there, despite of the inconvenience. Victoria was so done with all those fucking gay girls around her. Very done.

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It was a rough month for Max Caulfield. Emotional distress, visions and memories, fear and pushing herself harder every day, not to mention the college itself, forced her to stop in the most natural way. She just got sick, helplessly grounded by a fever, shivers and muscle pain. She had ignored it at the beginning, trying to disregard a runny nose, a breaking voice and dizziness, so it had developed into an even worse outcome. Now, weak and coughing she barely had strength to sit on the sheets, being entirely dependent on Steph and surrounded by a collection of meds, antibiotics included. Her girlfriend had dragged her to the doctor yesterday, who stated very seriously that there was no other way but just to spend the next week in bed, unless she wanted to get pneumonia. Max gave up,
knowing it was for the best, and damn, she really needed to rest.

The past 30 days had been a constant hassle, filled with looks around her shoulders, careful words during every conversation, and panic while discovering new facts and changes, but she had succeeded in some fields at last. She was able to bond with Kate and they spent a few afternoons in the cafeteria drinking tea and talking about safe and nontoxic issues. Max explained herself properly regarding the first encounter, blaming the orientation day, social anxiety and people around in general. It was partly a lie, but Kate understood, explaining her own fears in her respective, uplifting manner. Reluctant at first, her new-old friend lost her prejudices when she met Steph and made sure there was no hidden agenda in Max’s invitations and kind words. It was a relief for both sides and the friendship was slowly progressing, expanding the list of topics they were able to discuss. Unluckily, Kate also was meeting Nathan, not on the dating stage though, but she was still seeing him as trustful companion. It was too soon to warn her about the potential danger and young Prescott was playing his role amazingly. It seemed he changed into a better, more gallant person, but Max presumed it was just an act. She couldn’t be sure of anything anymore though.

Nathan invited Kate to the Vortex Club party and even if unenthusiastic, she would probably go. Max tried to talk her out of this idea, but there were no reasonable arguments she could find, still careful with the newly rebuilt connection. This venture might end badly though and Kate was aware of it. The Vortex club was always celebrating hard, encouraging everybody to act like crazy animals, so it wasn’t a safe environment or familiar for Kate. She relied on Nathan, who was way more skilled at destroying her apprehensions than Max waking them up. But all those worries were torn down and buried under a horrible fever, fatigue, headache and dry throat. She couldn’t go to the party tonight to watch Kate. She had to put her trust in her friends this time.

“Baby, how are you feeling?” Steph was by her side with her cold palm on Max’s forehead. Her tenderness and care was bringing Max solace, a feeling she had almost forgotten. They’ve been dating for almost a year now, but it was mostly long-distance, one of those kinds of relationships that never work out, lost in the space and longing. This time Max was lucky and felt lucky. It was good to have her own rock, not worrying about another day and not being alone with every single problem.

“It’s been worse, really. Thank you so much for taking care of me.” Her voice was cracking and weak. She hoped the next week would be boring, with no major tribulations to face. Max could really use a break from the hectic and complex future.

“Of course.” Steph just smiled, but then got thoughtful again, as always when she was on a mission. “The fever went down I guess, but let’s double check. The thermometer, my lady.”

Max felt like she had checked her temperature like a thousand times in the last three days, but she wouldn’t refuse. It felt good to be taken care of. Especially when the damn device was passed to her hands with a quick kiss.

“Be careful, I don’t want you to get sick.” Max smiled, trying to warn her girl, but knew it was useless. Then she remembered about the important event. “Are you going to the party tonight?”

Steph sat on the edge of the bed and nodded sadly. “I have to, you know, it’s duty not pleasure, especially with those dickheads around. Fucking Victoria didn’t let me back off, and another crazy Vortex pig-shit is not my priority at the moment. Anyway, I’m gonna be there for like an hour or two, setting everything up, then Evan will take over.” The more she talked, the more furious and angry she got. Steph planned everything cautiously of course, to minimize her involvement in the stage-managing job tonight. Most people would just ignore the poorly written and semi-legal contract and not showing up at all, but her dutifulness always forced her to respond fairly.
I know, it’s ok. I will miss you though.”

Steph smiled, putting the chicken soup bowl on the table and pushing it closer to the bed, within her girl’s reach. No one would like to consider it as a perfect breakfast, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Max sighed and grabbed the spoon, torn between being thankful and her hatred for garlic.

“I asked Chloe to check on you when I will be off.” Steph mentioned, watching her swallowing the garlic mixture with dignity but no pleasure.

Max layed down, feeling the wave of heat going through her body. She wasn’t sure if it was the soup or the fever growing back. It took her a moment to absorb the information. Chloe watching her would be a nice surprise, but Chloe should be watching Kate, and Chloe couldn’t be in two places at once. Or could she? Fuck, Max was really sick.

“Isn’t she going to the party?” She whispered.

“She will explain. It’s fine. We will take care of everything.” Her girl adjusted her pillow, aware of Max’ misgivings. It felt so damn good not being alone. “Everything will be fine.”

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“Rachel… What the fuck was that?” Chloe was covering her face with her hands, choking on her own breath, trying to save the scraps of her voice lost in a scream and a moan a moment ago. Her heart, beating abnormally fast, wanted to break loose from her chest and run away, like a chained dog begging to run after a thief. Rachel could hear it and feel the racing pulse, laying by her side, tracing the line of her breasts and outlines of her tattoos smiling lightly. She loved the fact that a small shiver was going through her girlfriend’s body every time she was touching her. Always so vulnerable just after, so hers.

“A ‘good morning’. It’s Friday, baby.” She murmured. “It requires a special treatment. Not to mention it’s been a month since we got back to the humble walls of Blackwell Academy, and I love to celebrate anniversaries that you always hella forget about.”

“I don’t forget.” The blue grin was weak, but because of the good reasons. “I’m hella happy with celebrating.”

Rachel kissed her slowly, with a little bit of fire still burning. They could really keep going, but the Friday schedule was packed and it was definitely time to get up. She peered at the clock checking if they weren’t already late. It was easy to lose track of time with her blue-haired wonder.

“Besides… I just wanted to spoil you… a little.” She whispered shyly. Rachel was spoiling her a lot actually, or herself with her, using the freedom the dorm room gave them.

“Yeah, you spoiled me four times in a row. I can’t move. I’m completely fucking dead. You fucked my brain out like literally. No complaints, but if I’m gonna fail this test today, we both would know what the ‘F’ stands for.”

For years, the first thing Chloe had always done after a passionate moment, was keeping Rachel in place desperately, unconsciously scared of her just standing up and leaving. Some things had changed recently, changed for good. Confidence and certainty had finally triumphed over the
familiar constant dread of being abandoned. Now Chloe was holding her because she just simply wanted to, knowing and damn fucking sure that Rachel wouldn’t disappear into thin air. It was a good thing, but like every change, it was somehow frightening.

There was more to it.

“You won’t get an ‘F’. Although… I’ve never thought we would be discussing your grades in bed.” Rachel stretched, not sure if she wanted to talk at all. Looking for her towel, she threw the blanket away and sat down trying to put her hair in order. Or to the point that she would be able to see something, not just to sense the reality. The reality was cruel, though. It was time to start the less intense part of the day.

“I wasn’t planning on it either.” Chloe miraculously found some energy to stop her in place, this time for a valid reason. “No, no, no. You’re not going anywhere. Yet. We have stuff to discuss and I don’t have fucking strength to get up yet.”

Rachel sighed helplessly. “What kind of stuff?”

“This Vortex Club shit.” Chloe shrugged, wiping off her sweaty forehead. “Max wants us to go, since she can’t make it herself. She made me fucking swear I’m gonna keep an eye on Kate. Some religious girls might get hella wild when unleashed. I promised, ok? Chloe Price, the guardian of decency, can you imagine?”

Rachel shook her head lightly, looking for a cigarette. They usually didn’t smoke inside, but nothing tasted better than fresh tobacco after making her girl come and just before diving into uncomfortable memories. It had been months since she actually attended a proper party. The last time she was so high, she barely remembered how to use her legs, wondering if she had any. The recall of herself dying on a dirty couch, eaten up with fucking darkness and numb to everything and everybody, not in control of anything, was still alive and kicking. It was so fucking easy to lose herself, to burn down her own switch of mind and ability to feel, with damn fucking fireworks. So easy to forget about the important things, about Chloe. One slip and she would be done. Damn, too fucking easy.

She hated being out of control. Full stop.

“I don’t want to go.” It was just a quiet whisper, but her girl could sense the dry terror behind it.

“It’s because of the drugs?” Chloe usually was clueless, but it was an obvious fear, obvious for both of them. “If you don’t want to, it’s ok, but you can’t isolate yourself fucking forever, Rach. It’s been a month already and you didn’t go anywhere except classes and some meet-ups. Sooner or later you will meet somebody snorting shit. Everybody is using it all the time anyway.”

“I just…” She really didn’t want to explain herself, not ready to admit how upsetting this idea really was. Chloe truly wanted to go to one of those Vortex pig-parties, she had previously laughed it off, sneering at Rachel for making an appearance, and here they were talking about it. She forgot to light up the smoke, so she clicked her zippo trying to get the right spark. People would fight over Chloe again, assholes would try to confront her with the gossips and shit, fucking Chase would make a scene. Rachel was tired of fighting in general.

And Kate. They should be there for her, but she didn’t sense why. The girl was an adult after all, she could do whatever she pleased. Maybe she wanted to lose her shit, everybody had the right to do it from time to time. Max was a dear friend, but was getting paranoid and weird sometimes, especially when it came to protecting other people.

Rachel smirked. She wasn’t the only one who liked to be in control.
“If you don’t want to, don’t force yourself.” Chloe didn’t give up, still pushing this thing. “I can take care of this Kate business alone. But if you’re still fucking tempted to do something stupid… You know I would be there to take care of you, if your fucking will of steel would start to bend.” She sat by her side, kissing her shoulder.

“Thanks, mom.” It was more sarcastic than Rachel planned, so she covered it with a steadfast exhale of smoke. “It’s not like that. I just don’t want to get back to this lifestyle and surround myself with those assholes. I’m so fucking happy now, that I don’t need anything else. Just you.” Chloe’s eyes smiled. “But I understand if you want to go, especially after you finally got into the Vortex popularity ship.”

Chloe stopped smiling. So, they finally tripped over this subject. Damn it.

When they had gotten back to school, Rachel assumed a lot of things to change and work differently, but she didn’t expect Chloe to be the newest rising Blackwell star. Her girlfriend had been barely a shadow years ago, just one of those beautiful misunderstood dorks, with a touch of cute rebel, but not in the spotlight by any means. She was no one and then she belonged to Rachel, end of story. When you watch a caterpillar constantly, at every step of the transformation, a butterfly doesn’t amaze you, you might even miss the whole shocking beauty and be fucking surprised by the world’s bewilderment to it.

Rachel was close, too close to discern how much of a drastic change it had been. Blackwell was an art school after all, where an edgy look, rebellious and sassy attitude were appreciated beyond everything else, regardless of being a knockout in the looks department in general. Chloe was the perfect and ultimate crush now, doing very well academically, and still didn’t give a single fuck about anything. Boys, girls, fucking girls especially, were crushing on her super hard, just like Rachel had been years ago, and the fact that the blue-haired rebel didn’t pay any attention, presenting an overwhelming nonchalance, was heating them all up even more.

It had changed her girl though. Chloe was way more confident lately, more freed and relaxed, not worrying about every single step, since everything she was doing was greeted with appreciation. Rachel was happy and proud at first, but then she started noticing that people actually preferred her not to be around Chloe, wanting all her attention for themselves. She was treated as another point up for the ‘it girl’ having a sexy fuck and a cheerleader trophy, and being an addition wasn’t something Rachel was used to. She was putting up with it not complaining much, waiting for the right moment to interfere, but no time was right. She didn’t want to sound like an obsessed and jealous bitch, learning the hard lesson of supporting, not leading. Chloe had been only hers before, now the whole world wanted a piece of her. There was only a thin line for Rachel to cross that was still preventing her from exploding with bitter possessiveness. Controlling herself, bearing with the situation was harder every day.

Rachel expected a huge battle before getting back on top of the social pyramid, but she had no idea she would have to fight with her own girl. And she wasn’t prepared nor willing to do it. Fuck, it was getting harder.

There was more to it.

She had noticed her girl was sometimes getting back late, after meeting with the crowd of admirers, sometimes drunk, sometimes even high, wasted on a free vice. Chloe didn’t allow herself to use weed around Rachel, forbidding any kind of drug out of their lives all together, but she didn’t reject the idea in general. The blonde never asked her to stop, it came out naturally, along with the rehab, but hiding and ignoring it was even worse. Rachel suspected Chloe wasn’t sure of how to deal with her unexpected popularity, that was bringing her spontaneous gifts, and was just going with the flow
without any kind of strategy. She needed one to survive and not to be swallowed up by the needy fans, but they had never talked about it. They didn’t know how to start. It was troubling, getting out of hand. Out of control for both of them.

It was partly why Rachel was spoiling her.

“What was that supposed to mean?” Chloe frowned.

“Oh, you know what.” Rachel turned back, hiding her face in another cloud of smoke. She didn’t want to sound bitter, but the words made their own choices and played their own songs.

Her girlfriend sighed and bit her lip, knowing they had to deal with this issue sooner or later. It was unnatural to switch roles, to be the one people followed and she was never striving for that kind of fame. Rachel was still her world and the most important journey, but she liked to hang out with those kids from time to time. Chloe wanted her girl to have a life outside of them too. That was why she was pushing the Vortex party thing, even if it wasn’t the smartest and safest idea.

“Are you jealous?” She asked softly, skipping unnecessary small-talk. It was also new. She wasn’t that direct before, especially not after she had reached the sky four times in a row.

“Yeah, of course I’m jealous.” Rachel shrugged angrily. “But not as a competition jealous, but girlfriend jealous, mind you.” She pointed at Chloe, smirking. The fact that her fame was fading out wasn’t as agitating as Chloe being wanted by everybody.

Her amazing blue-haired girl didn’t fully grasp the fact that she was everything Rachel had, full stop. The blonde put so much work and effort to make this relationship work, rebuild and refunction, that she couldn’t imagine herself being without her. It wasn’t just love, it was an addiction on every level, an obsession almost. Rachel knew she was quick to get addicted, she learned in the most terrifying way, and now not being in charge made her feel lost and scared again.

She tried socializing, but everything seemed so stupid and useless after all the shit they had been through. Old friends were distanced, new ones were mostly interested in getting into her pants, and it wasn’t something she would even like to joke about. Rachel was feeling fucking alone, organizing everything, preparing, taking care. She forgot about herself, wanted to forget investing everything in Chloe’s well-being, when her rebel was busy being a Blackwell star. Rachel loved and hated it at the same time. Not to mention there was yet another issue, another thorn that she wasn’t ready to talk about.

There was more to it. Still. Confusion. More layers. More confusion. Fuck.

“Competition.” Chloe scoffed. “Baby, they are just some fucking kids following me around. I don’t even know why and what for.”

“It’s called popularity.” She educated her girl, finishing smoking and knowing that it may not be as simple as Chloe might think. Along with the admirers came the haters, yet another reason to be upset, and even a thought of somebody hating her was waking up Rachel’s rage. She loved this girl, for fuck’s sake.

This issue was getting more and more layers every day. It was getting out of hand.

“Fuck popularity. And speaking of...” Rachel got thrown back on the bed with a quick, skilled move, covered with the sweaty and still barely breathing blue-haired pirate, who was kissing her neck and shoulders, going down.

“I’m gonna be fucking late.” Rachel moaned, not letting her go and enjoying it way too much. It was
time to turn into work mode, to take a shower, but oh fuck. Who could resist…

“I didn’t start the spoiling thing.” Came the soft response, just before Rachel started to see the stars.

***

Nathan knocked on the door, tired of waiting and listening to the prayers. He could use a prayer himself, if that would help to summon Kate out of her room. It was getting late and his jar of patience was already empty. Kate opened at once, and then almost slammed the door in his face not being prepared for a visit. The rules of an old-fashioned courting were forbidding such extreme actions.

“Hi, Nathan. I didn’t really expect to see you here.” She said, trying to hide behind the door covering herself, still standing in her pajamas and with uncombed hair. Only her soul was fed this morning, not her appearance.

“Hi. I’m sorry.” He bowed his head nervously, not looking at her. “I hope you don’t mind. I should’ve called or something. I wanted to make sure you would come with me today.”

She was hesitant, but his eagerness wasn’t unpleasant. Kate liked him, a lot, so it was a nice surprise, regardless of good manners and principles she was used to.

“I would like to, but I’ve never been to one of those parties. How is it? Is it safe?”

“As safe as possible.” Nathan assured her quickly. He couldn’t lose this opportunity. “Sometimes it’s pretty loud, but we could always go for a walk. And there is alcohol. I know you are against it, but don’t worry, there will be a teacher on the site.”

The teacher’s part got Kate’s attention. “Oh, which one?”

“Mark Jefferson. You attend his class, right?” Nathan informed her eagerly. Jefferson was everybody’s favorite. He could act cool, ignoring his pupils drinking and smoking, but was always responsible and knew when to interfere if a situation was getting out of hand.

“Ah yeah. He is very nice.” Kate liked the guy too and apparently it erased the rest of her doubts. “All right, you convinced me then.” She nodded with a smile.

Nathan sighed with relief. She giggled hearing it. It was cute how much he cared about this night-out. “I’m gonna pick you up at 8. Not that it’s far, it’s on the swimming pool site, but still.” He explained himself awkwardly, surprised by his own shyness. It was welcomed with another giggle, but damn it was a cute one.

“Of course, Nathan.” Kate smiled encouragingly, closing the door. “I can’t wait.”

***

She met Rachel in the bathroom, just getting out of the shower, brushing her hair with this annoying, knowing grin on her face. Victoria suspected how and why this smirk was installed on her pretty face, she had heard it being born. The empress blocked the exit, leaning on the door frame, and
crossed her arms on her chest. Friday just got better, the favored victim couldn’t escape the cage and Victoria would never lose a good occasion to release some steam.

“Did you finish your gay morning or just started?” She rose her eyebrow with a modest interest and fake compassion. Rachel scoffed, but was still taking care of her hair ignoring the unwanted company.

“Taking a break for my classes, but I will get back to those activities as soon as possible, thank you so much for asking.” Rachel responded contented and smiled broadly like the fucking blond snake she really was. “How was your morning, Victoria? Still waking up alone in your bed?”

Oh, a personal blow. The fallen princess was really getting lower and lower with her wit. “Better alone than in bad company.” Victoria attacked again, damn, too harsh this time.

Rachel didn’t stop smiling nor combing her hair. “You’re missing out.”

She was so confident, and distastefully happy. It was about time to wipe out all the pleasure from those perfect lips.

“I’m wondering…” Victoria rose her chin, pretending that the thought and the next attack weren’t already prepared. “Do your parents know you fuck Price every single day, or is that one of your dirty secrets?”

Rachel’s eyes grew dark, but she didn’t lose her game. She obviously delayed leaving the bathroom, either enjoying the little skirmish or cowardly avoiding a defeat. Her hair couldn’t be more combed, unless she was about to start tying complicated braids or something.

It was too easy to corner her lately. She really asked for it.

“I’m updating them with photos and videos every other Saturday, including special presentations before every family dinner.” Rachel shrugged and started to put balsam on her legs, not really caring if the towel was covering her properly. “What are you sending to your parents Victoria? Your sad selfies taken alone in the dorms’ bathroom while crying your eyes out after Nathan?”

Victoria treated young Prescott like a brother and trustful friend and it was common knowledge. They wouldn’t be a good couple and she never insisted for them to be. They shared social status, passion for photography and a dark sense of humor, but Amber couldn’t understand it. The only thing she could think of was screwing people and screwing them over. Typical.

“Nathan and I are just good friends. I know where to draw the line and how not to cross it, not like some people who obsessively whore around with some social delinquents.” She snapped quickly, annoyed by Rachel’s ignorance.

“Seems you belong to very interesting circles, Victoria. I’m impressed by your knowledge and experience, but be careful. Social delinquents can be addictive.” Another smooth smirk, taste of a warning and a dose of balsam to her arms this time. Amber was in a good mood today. Too good. Let’s make it stop.

“I can see that. You’ve always liked to feed your addiction on dirty things, first drugs, then this gay thing.”

Victoria looked at Rachel’s face with uncovered pleasure. The word ‘gay’ was always making her furious and embarrassed at the same time. She could fuck girls, but she had a problem with those three damn letters. Triggering her was always truly a thrill.
Rachel pretended she didn’t care. She was getting worse and worse with pretending overall.

“Look at the calendar, Tori. It’s not the nineteenth century anymore, you should be way more tolerant and accepting. Being a bigot doesn’t go well with your college credit.” Rachel decided that her shoulders also needed some cream and was very dedicated with putting it on. Yeah, cream all over yourself, you slimy bitch.

“Oh, I am accepting and my college credit has nothing to do with it, it’s still pretty clean, not like some people’s who missed out a year.” Another small bite was confronted with a joyful smirk. This thing wasn’t activating Rachel’s rage, not as much as the homo shit. “You can wave your rainbow flag as much as you want though. I don’t care. But I have to admit with an honest regret, it’s tragic a little bit.” Victoria sighed with calculated pity.

“I understand your regrets, Victoria, but there is nothing tragic about not being an unsatisfied and pathetic slut, trust me.”

She noticed a glimpse of unsureness in her victim’s eye. Rachel was still biting back like a blind snake, sensing the danger but unable to see where it would come from. It was always nice to wonder her with something new.

“The slut part is out of my league certainly, but poor Chloe Price would be devastated when she learns you just used her, fucked her brains out, as we all could hear, and switched back to the dick department. The poor girl will need a helpful hand.” Victoria was a good actress, maybe not a Shakespearian one, but her worrying grimace was worth an Oscar or two. “A lot of people dig her now, a little rising star. I’m sure she would be able to find a replacement pretty fast, especially with a decent and proper guidance.”

Amber got angry. Not furious, not yet, but she was close. Price was another trigger, a smaller one, but worked very well if casted accurately. Victoria sensed the couple had some dirty secrets she could use against them and shaking the trust Amber had in her blue fuck was like a trebuchet’ shot on a middle-age battlefield. Not always aimed properly, but loud and noticeable.

“You are delusional.” Rachel finally decided her morning preparations were done. Poor Price would have to lick off all that fucking cream, she could get sick or something. “Did you steal some of Nathan’s drugs again? You shouldn’t use this stuff, it could be dangerous and even deadly.”

Nathan’s involvement with the drug business was sometimes troubling, but the illegal stuff helped him to control his emotional problems. Amber was a fucking junkie for months and now she was taking it over to Nathan. It was time for another trigger.

“Oh Rachel, we both know you ain’t gay. You can’t even force yourself to say it.” Victoria moved graciously, creating her a path to escape. Amber was close to get fucking raged, so it was better let her run away than get violent. “Enjoy your girl-toy as much as you want and let me know when you’re gonna get back on track. I’m always willing to aid a tormented soul in need and find you some decent cock to ride, so you could send your parents some more straight pics this time.”

Rachel walked to the door casually, not hurrying or speeding, but it was more than obvious she had enough this morning. Good. Maybe it would teach her a lesson or two and she wouldn’t be so eager to do anything stupid at the party.

“I’m on the right track, Victoria, trust me.” Amber had to have the last word, but this time it was a song of desperation, not victory. “It would be better for all of us if you would find one to ride for yourself first. And if you don’t mind me using yet another equine metaphor, I would prefer to get back on my own horse. If it bothers you, buy yourself a pair of headphones.”
Rachel bumped into her girlfriend in the hallway. Chloe now dressed up and fully prepared for the upcoming school struggle, stopped her in place. First, she just wanted to get one more kiss before the class, but then grew worried. Something was wrong and the blue pirate could sense it.

“Are you fine, sunshine?” Chloe asked softly.

“Yeah, I just had this damn slut ruining my morning.” Rachel confirmed, rolling her eyes. She was too upset to pretend Victoria didn’t get to her. Chloe would guess anyway. She immediately got angry, striving for revenge and looked around for the fashion snake. Rachel sighed and stroked her cheek to calm her down. “I’m fine really, you don’t have to kick her ass.”

Chase appeared in the hallway, smiled at them graciously and vanished quickly into her room before Chloe could react. The blue anger snorted with irritation. “I fucking have to.”

The fights became uglier and happened more often. Rachel had to figure a way to stop it somehow, otherwise they would both get expelled yet again, but this time for horrid torture and vicious murder. Chloe was all eager to get violent, passed the stage of back-talking a long time ago and seeing Rachel upset made her blood boil. She never asked for details and how Victoria was able to get under her girl’s skin, but she assumed it was probably Blackwell’s popularity contest or Chase just being a slut.

It wasn’t Rachel Amber’s month for sure.

Not able to do anything else, she just held Rachel closer, getting all wet and creamy from the fucking solution put in tons today. Ah, bathroom fights were so inconvenient. “We will talk later, ok? I have to check on Max.” She whispered, knowing how late they both were.

“Sure baby.” Rachel wanted to vanish into their lair but got stopped yet again, this time with a long kiss. Solution or wet hair didn’t matter, passion was taking over, and Chloe got seriously concerned that the towel might fall off her girlfriend’s chest. They stopped before the whole dorm was able to feed on Rachel’s naked beauty, and parted following their ways, exchanging longing looks.

Damn, it was good to be in love.

Looking after her girl, Chloe almost crashed on Steph, who was just leaving the room with dirty dishes. Max’s girlfriend was in a rush, but still found enough time to lecture her about all the possible dangers, responsibilities and the meds, repeating yet again to text her if something terrible would happen. It was adorable, but Chloe heard it at least fifteen times and knew how to take care of a sick person. She listened patiently and when there were no warnings left, she finally went inside, greeting her sick friend loudly.

“Maximus Prime! How are you feeling?”

“Fine, way better now, thank you, Chloe.” Max looked pale and weak, but a little bit better than yesterday, when Steph almost had had to carry her to bed, not in a romantic innuendo.

“I’m gonna babysit you tonight! Only for a few hours, don’t worry.” Chloe sat by her side, joyful and carefree as always. “We can watch your final fantasy shit until you’re gonna pass the fuck out. Just don’t expect me to love it.”
“Chloe?” Max coughed dryly, tuning her throat up to speak, “You will be at this party, right? With Kate?”

“Don’t worry, I will take care of it.” Chloe’s gaze got colder. “I don’t trust this Prescott shit at all. He always wanted to get with Rachel and now he’s trying with this girl. I will keep an eye on him.”

Max couldn’t express how grateful she was for somebody taking her warnings seriously. She finally found an ally and necessary help. Her breath got easier, when she finally relaxed between pillows and blankets. Chloe was on her side, gave her word. They could work on it together. The best feeling in the world.

“Rachel also has to be careful.” Max let yet another counsel to slip out. “She’s really good for you.”

“She is. And... I’m... good for her.” It was good to finally say it, admit it, instead of just brushing it off, cracking a joke instead. They were meant for each other, despite all the flaws, harsh moments, mistakes and troubling issues. Talking about her girl with her friend always made her anxious though, so Chloe got up, ready to conquer another chem class. “Will talk later Maximo. I have to go. Take care of yourself, drink this hella stinky soup or whatever Steph gave you and take your meds. See ya.”

“See you later, Chloe.” She heard when was closing the door behind her. This time she didn’t slam it, trying to be as gentle as possible.

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It was lunch time, the sweet breeze of a weekend on Blackwell Academy’s grounds. Victoria decided to inspect the venue one more time before getting back to class. Skipping another meeting in the cafeteria wasn’t challenging since she wasn’t even hungry, too absorbed by preparations and thrilled for the evening. Everything was going smoothly though, except Nathan. She tried to question him a few times today, but he seemed distant and preoccupied, spending all his breaks with Mark Jefferson. Victoria knew he was passionate about photography, but it looked like a common secret or classified arrangements for something bigger, something she had no idea about, and the curiosity was eating her up. He didn’t respond to her request about fucking over Amber with some fix tonight. She would have to manage it herself. Alone, as always.

Nathan seemed better and healthier lately. The stuff he was taking fixed up all his paranoia and erased most of his fears. Keeping himself busy with his passion for photography and even the stupid involvement with Kate Marsh were also beneficial. Victoria was still worried though. And concerned as fuck.

When she passed the parking lot, she recognized a familiar RV taking three spots at once. Of course, the party required special supplies and half of the school was buying. This Frank Bowers guy was a despicable creature, but the whole bliss of Arcadia Bay depended on him. Victoria hoped he wouldn’t show at the party himself, as he actually never had, but since Nathan was too busy to take care of the business, it might actually happen. There were no parties without Bower’s stash and he wouldn’t miss the opportunity to sell.

Amber and Price were spending their lunch in the same location, every single day, creating another weird Blackwell tradition. Usually they were just making out, wallowing and rolling over the grass like fucking dogs with an idiotic giggle, luckily with their clothes on. Victoria hoped the cold winter
front would force them to find a secret hideout indoors, since the weather wouldn’t let them to
devastate the yard any longer. Oregon’s fall was supposed to be cold and rainy, but this year was
pretty fortunate for those two. They didn’t even care if somebody was watching or not, ignoring all
the students and teachers altogether. Victoria looked at them attentively. This time they were just
talking, and she could sense the complications and the hassle even from here.

She didn’t even have anything against them though, except the morning wake-ups, really. Amber
wasn’t a danger anymore, not even a shadow of a competition, and Price’s fame was fast and would
burn down quickly. Their dedication to each other was disturbing, making everybody else strive for
similar companionship and dedication. Victoria didn’t even let her thoughts go into that direction,
scolding herself swiftly. Chloe Price didn’t deserve her popularity, she had never earned it or worked
on it, and Amber should be punished for all her stupid and annoying wits aimed at Victoria for the
past 3 years.

Walking into their direction, she noticed a flock of crows sitting on the ground, feeding on the lost
grains. The birds looked like a herd of bad omens for the couple and Victoria had never identified
more with those damn animals than now. They flew away with a loud croak when she passed by.

She could hear them now, since they kept forgetting about the world around, while with each other,
reckless as always.

“Rachel, it’s not good. You’re melting the fuck down lately. We really should talk about it.” Price
was holding Amber like a lost treasure. Enjoy while you can, bitch. She will leave you one day.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” The princess was showing her weak and vulnerable side, still
pretending she really had some human feelings. How cute. Then her mood changed immediately
while spotting some freshman girl approaching them with a simple intention to chit-chat. “Hey, back
off, she’s with me. Damn, those fucking retards. One more fucking wink and I swear, I will burn this
school down.”

Chloe was grinning like an idiot, but let her girlfriend to scare the other one away. It was pathetic to
see how they kept fighting for this fucked up relationship. Amber was hissing in a morbid anger, like
somebody was just trying to kidnap her blue punk, not to start a nice formal interaction. She was
losing it, Victoria could swear.

“Rachel. You know I love you more than my fucking life, right?” Oh, fuck no, they started to kiss
again. What a bunch of fags. They almost gave this poor stranger a heart attack and now they were
all over each other.

“Yeah. I love you too.” Of course, Amber, of course you do, like you could love somebody for real,
you fake plastic piece of trash.

Not willing to witness, either visually or audibly yet another encounter, Victoria made herself visible,
walking towards them faster. “Sorry to break this love fest, but I have a serious matter to discuss.”

“Fuck off, Victoria.” Price was still hugging her girlfriend, even if Amber’s eyes were filled with
flames of pure hate. She didn’t like anybody to disturb her manipulative game.

“Always gallant and gracious, Chloe.” Victoria smiled politely. “It will only take a moment and you
will be able to proceed... with whatever you were doing. You haven’t sent the RSVP yet and the
party is tonight. It would be very nice and less rude if you confirmed, or deny, like normal people
do.”

Price looked at her girl with care and concern, not willing to respond for both of them. Damn, her
leash was even shorter than Victoria suspected. The poor girl, even if not very likable, was attached to Amber’s ass more than principal Wells was to a bottle of booze.

“We will be there. Both of us, Tori.” Rachel decided to speak, still cuddling into this dirty jacket of her punk girl. They really should get some coupons for dry cleaning, since people should look neat in school at least.

“You’re confirming too? I thought you ain’t feeling well.” Victoria didn’t expect to separate them, knowing that inviting one of them meant inviting both, but it was nice to irritate Amber a little bit more. She got greedy for victories after today’s little fight in the bathroom.

“You had to mistake me with somebody else…” Rachel straightened up, still close to Price, but not in this annoying teddy bear pose anymore. Victoria noticed something familiar in her eyes, a will of real fight, a glimpse of danger. “…I’m alive and kicking. We both are. See you tonight.”

All was said, so the empress had to walk off, leaving one sneaky comment as a final goodbye. “Can’t wait, Rachel. I really can’t wait.”

When the fashion snake disappeared in the entrance of the swimming pool, Chloe dragged Rachel closer, kissed her one more time and then caught her sight with a broad smile.

“You really want to go or was it just a fucking blow?”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s been too long. It’s time for me to get back into this business and kick her skinny ass.” Rachel ran her fingers through her hair, still hesitant about the whole operation, but the morning talk forced her to confront some troubling issues. It was time to get back and take what’s hers, she couldn’t isolate herself any longer. It wasn’t healthy for both of them.

“That’s my girl.” A kiss on her ear suggested that she made the right decision.

Rachel laughed, even if still bothered. She was never afraid of any confrontation, but wasn’t sure if her luck hadn’t reached the limits already. “Plus, I may have to break some hands for slapping your ass.” She added, more foreseeing than flirting.

“Is that a contest?” Chloe winked, knowing that a party meant her girl looking damn hot, dressed up for the occasion and gaining all the bits of attention from the drunken crowd. Rachel responded with another kiss, getting back to their lunch routine, feeding herself on those lips again. It felt good to have something planned after all.

“Better not be.” She whispered and kissed her even harder.

***

The evening came unexpectedly. It was high noon, then class, yet another, a few smokes, a smile, dinner, and the sun was already going down summoning those annoying little sparkling things called stars. The first hour of twilight was always hectic before an important event, intense and overfilled with drudgeries. The yells at the corridor where brief, doors shot way faster, and the loud talks changed into quiet and feverish conversations. It was time to get ready.

Chloe didn’t pay much attention to it, not really intending to change into anything special. It wasn’t her wedding for fuck’s sake, it was just a school party, a swimming pool disco club, one of the most
pathetic things on earth. Seeing Rachel going through her closet and varying her pick every five seconds, Chloe backed off, withdrawing herself to room number 219, starting her watch over Max. Steph welcomed her with relief, still stressed out about priorities and promises she had to keep.

Left alone between leather, lace, eyeshadows and mascaras, Rachel decided to come back in her full glory. It was necessary to look as splendid as possible, to amaze and conquer again. Still uncertain if that was the right path to follow, she didn’t want to kill any chances of a future outcome. She didn’t say anything when Chloe snuck out, knowing that she wasn’t really wanted or needed by Max’s bed. In any meaning.

Her relations with Max were complicated. They always balanced between unspoken regrets, sparks of jealously dripping weird riddles every other sentence. Double meanings were their bread and butter, every glass of water filled with tension. Every time they discussed anything more prominent than school or every day chores, it was getting weirder and weirder. It was yet another thing that was stressing her out. Chloe sensed the pressure, but could only listen to the abnormal conversation usually smoking on the side or helplessly looking at her shoes. Steph also couldn’t find any solution or golden advice, so they all pretended everything was perfectly fine. That’s partly why Rachel wasn’t invited to the night’s watch.

A punk or a lady. A dress or leather.

A long time ago it would’ve been a hard choice, but Rachel didn’t want to deceive anybody. The selection was finally made and it felt good to wear this, to feel like this and look damn fucking hot again. She got sick of the flannel and t-shirts all the time. She would miss them by the end of the night though. The privileges of being a constant mood-switch.

Steph knocked on her door when Rachel was almost ready, to inform her that she was leaving to go to the site and when she saw her, gasped silently. That was a good sign. If Rachel could amaze her good friend, she could amaze everybody. A provocative look wasn’t used for a long time and it was fun to actually get it back and set in action.

It was time.

She planned to give Chloe a kiss before, but decided to wonder her at the party instead. Shocking was her strength once, a secret forte and favorite weapon and it would be nice to remind her girl of this forgotten mystery. The party had already started, and the loud music was blasting waking the swimming pools’ echo. She got in and got stormed by the crowd, friendly, tipsy, drunk, high. Steph greeted her again, between the cables and sound mixer, still impressed. She wasn’t the only one. Victoria Chase got rigid, Taylor brought her a beer, Dana almost cried with happiness seeing her again. Hayden found her a place by a table, starting a smooth small-talk. They couldn’t hear each other, it was part of the clubbing charm and nothing was important enough to listen carefully and struggle with a scream.

Rachel Amber leaned into her seat and scrutinized the crowd in front of her. She didn’t lose her magnetism and her power, just hid it for a while. It was like a bike ride, you could get clumsy after getting back on the saddle, but you would always remember. Some things never change.

The wings of confidence started to open up and she was able to fly again. The beer was almost done, she got another, prepared to get a little bit wasted. Yet another small-talk, smiles and admiration she had missed. Some people wanted to introduce themselves, some wanted to remind her of their existence. The good outfit and makeup was summoning them like moths to a lightbulb.

Light, light, strobing light. The music touching every fiber of her body. It felt damn fucking good to be back.
Rachel had some obligations to fulfil before she would be able to lose herself in the moment. She got up and started to wander around in the gracious dance of greetings and half-sober grins, trying to find Kate. She almost forgot about Chloe’s promise though. It was easy to forget, being kidnaped by the dry, deep sound of trance music and flashes of the pulsating light.

“Rachel, you look awesome!” Dana caught her again and decided to stick in.

“It’s good to be back.” She answered, finally noticing Kate. The girl was sitting with Nathan, laughing loudly and drinking something that didn’t look like apple juice. Good for her, it was Friday night after all and Prescott was really taking care of her. Rachel shrugged and turned back to Dana.

“So, what’s up? How is the drama club doing without me?”

“We are suffering, like really!” Her friend had to yell her concern to be heard properly. “We will be doing Shakespeare again. You must rejoin.”


“What play?” Rachel yelled back.

“Oh, you know, ’Titus Andronicus’, super heavy stuff. I don’t dig it at all, but Mr. Keaton insisted.” Dana rolled her eyes, but seeing Rachel intent she just smiled perplexedly. “You interested?”

“Maybe.” It wouldn’t be a stupid idea to actually get involved with something safe. It would give her and Chloe some space, some additional breath. Rachel finished her beer with one long quaff and looked around for another one.

Explosions of light. Laughs. A splash of water. A push. ‘Sorry!’

Her eyes meet Mark Jefferson’s gaze. The famous monster, who she avoided like a plague. During the last month, she heard only good things about him and his lectures, not to mention that Max herself was attending his class. Rachel stared to suspect, that all the warnings were just pure bullshit, even if she was safe from this teacher’s company. He was looking straight at her, but everybody was looking, that was the plan after all. It could be another of Max’s premonitions still ringing in her ears, but Rachel shivered, feeling sarcastically uncomfortable and turned away. “Where are the drinks?” She yelled and somebody passed her one. She took a sip, put it on the table and jumped into the dancing crowd, trying to stop time, freeze the moment, free of any concerns, sorrows and agitating feelings.

***

Chloe was sitting in silence, almost in darkness, feeding only on the frustrating steady sound of a clock, beating down every single second with an annoying tap. Muted from the noises outside, she was focused on her friend, ready to aid, if needed. No request had been made though, she wasn’t asked for a single thing, since Chloe had come here. The blue-haired watcher felt useless.


The room smelled like illness and vanilla. Max’s eyes were closed, she was barely breathing through her open mouth. Her fever was visible, she was burning inside, desperately fighting for every inhale. She had woken up only a few times to get a sip of water and fell down on her pillows speechless and exhausted. Chloe hadn’t left her side for more than two hours now, wondering if she should call
Steph and update her with the situation, or just patiently wait till Max’s girlfriend would get back from her duty. She pulled up her phone a few times almost ready to send the message, and then putting it back, unsure. Steph was probably doing everything in her power to get back home anyway. Another stressful text wouldn’t help.


The time was passing slowly, carelessly slipping through her fingers, trapping them together in a weird sick silence. There were no movies to watch, no music to listen to. Chloe focused only on Max’s breath desperately waiting for a long exhale or any other sign of getting better. It wasn’t coming, not anytime soon.

Counting seconds was her only entertainment at the moment, a poor one, but a stressful beggar couldn’t demand a lot. Chloe scoffed at herself. Max was just sick, for fuck’s sake. She shouldn’t worry. Fever is always greater at night.


More seconds had dispatched, echoing around, filling the space with a murmur of passing time. Chloe bowed her head, reaching for her friend’s hand, hoping that her physical presence would help somehow, pass the good energy or whatever the fuck they called it.


“I had a dream…” She heard a weak whisper. Max’s eyes were still closed, locked in an illness. Chloe wasn’t sure if she really spoke or if that was just a draft or a resonance.

“Yeah? Tell me about it.” She whispered back.

“I had a dream, that… You used to be mine.” Her lips were barely moving, but the grip on Chloe’s hand was a little bit firmer.

Twenty-four. Twenty-five. Twenty-six.

Chloe could swear the time had stopped, but the hands of the clock were proving her otherwise. An annoying little clicking, circling around the twelve-hour face, was spinning around the troubling matter.

“Yours?” She asked softly.

Max moved her hand, trying to break free from the grasp, but Chloe didn’t let her escape. Then her sick friend took a deep desperate breath, her eyes opened for a moment in the glowing gaze, her body tensed.

“It was a different time, but the same place. Arcadia Bay… this shitty town.” Max was talking faster, still diving in fever and sweat. “You were so… devastated, because Rachel was gone.” Forty-one. “Dead.” Forty-two. “Murdered.” Forty-three. “And Steph wasn’t there. We just had each other.” Fifty-five. Fifty-six. Almost. Another. Minute.

Chloe took a deep, shaken breath. She had to swallow twice, before she could speak again. She could feel the terror of Max’s story, slowly growing inside of her, forcing her to imagine unspeakable horror.

“It sounds like a fucking disaster. For both of us.” Her tone was still firm and comforting, even if she
expected her voice to crack.


Her friend stopped responding, drifting into her dreams, dreads and visions. Then she squeezed Chloe’s hand rapidly, almost marking her skin with her nails.

“It was a nightmare.” Max gasped for air. “You were with me, Chloe. You held my hand when the tornado was coming. I remember the wind, this wind... and... everything falling apart. I tried to fix it so many times but you... You said we will last. Forever.”

Chloe could swear the clock was beating faster, way faster just like her heart. She tuned to the sound once again, gathering her thoughts, emotions in one place, hoarding them like unruly sheep. Time was still passing slowly though. Reality didn’t speed up.


“We are not living in a dream, Max.” She responded, scared and terrified. Max didn’t notice how Chloe’s voice had changed, almost unconscious, still too weak to even sit down, to discuss the issue like friends would do. Like they had never done.

“You kept repeating ‘I wish Rachel was here’.” Max licked her chapped lips. It was hard for her to speak, to make any sound in general. “‘Rachel was here’. ‘Rachel was here...’ You never stopped repeating. Until...” Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Thirty-three. “But... But she wasn’t. She was dead and buried. Rotten. You found her... we both found her... there...” Another gasp of air. “It broke your heart. It broke mine.”


“Max.” Why was she crying. Nothing had happened. Everything was alright. It had been always alright.

“She tried to save you...” The tears appeared on Chloe’s friend’s cheeks, under her eyelids. “She really tried to save you, you know, she begged you to live...” Max sobbed shortly. One fast and rapid weep. “Even in death she begged you to... be happy...” Minute. Start. Another. Minute. “But you kept dying, and dying, and dying, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it. Like... you had to die when she died, you know?” She sobbed hard again, even if it was more than she could bear.

Max shouldn’t cry. Chloe shouldn’t either. And here they were. The grasp of their hands was desperate, sweaty, painful, in agony.


“Max, please... Please don’t.” Chloe lifted her head, sobbing uncontrollably. She was so close to believe in this horror, to feel the loss, to recognize the message.

“You don’t understand.” Max shook her head, moving very, very slowly.

Twenty-seven. It’s time. Twenty-nine. Time again.

“I do, really. I don’t know shit about dreams, but...” Chloe wiped out the tears, breathing fast and shallow. “If you’re talking about this one time between us... when something happened... I know you were confused, fuck, me too. I know we both thought there was something... more. It seemed that way for a moment. But I was fucking lost, Max... Rachel ditched me then and... I love you, Max, but... It’s Rachel. Rachel is the one for me.” She wasn’t sure if the words had any meaning, if
the effort had any sense. Blinded by the blurred vision, she was rocking herself slowly, calming down, erasing the horrors she just heard. Forgetting.

Forty-seven, Forty-eight. No. Forgetting.

“I know.” Max looked at her, with her red puffy eyes and her whole pain and trust in one single sight. Chloe couldn’t stand it. She turned away, but her grasp of her hand was still firm. She was there, still, even if she begged the reality not to be.

“I’m not sure if it makes sense... or make you feel better.” Chloe murmured.


“It does.” Max nodded fast, even tried to smile. Her pale lips didn’t want to bend to her will, but Chloe understood, saw the smirk anyway. “It does. I don’t feel like an idiot anymore. I love Steph.”

“I know you do.” Chloe wasn’t sure who was comforting who. She wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

Fifty-four. Fifty-five. Fifty-six.

The time didn’t fucking care, just clicking and ticking like nothing was happening.

“I just want my friend back, without those stupid questions and things around it.” Max sobbed again, with the last seize of strength. “I just want to be free... free from this. I don’t want to be... so out of place anymore. I don’t want to feel... stupid. Fuck. I just want to be happy and... and... let go.”


“I’m here, Mad Max.” Chloe looked at her again, closing her hand in hers. She was moving back and forth in a steady rhythm dictated by the clock, by the passing time, like a broken toy. “I’m here. We will fix it. We will fix everything.” She pressed her hand to her lips, then to her forehead begging Steph to come, begging it to stop, to be done.

Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.

“You won’t fix shit, Chloe.” Max smirked sadly. “You don’t have to.”

***

“Rachel Amber, so nice to see you again.” The fallen princess turned to Victoria with an unsteady move. She wasn’t sober, but not drunk yet, balancing on a thin line of restraint and lost dignity. She was still dangerous, a little bit gawky in her fierce responses though, but liable for baiting and small provocation. That was all Victoria wanted and needed.

“The pleasure is all mine.” Rachel tilted her head, taking a vague pose and presenting all her toxic beauty. She looked outstanding today, there was no question about it, carefully prepared for any sort of encounter. This predator image could indicate she was on the hunt, especially since Price wasn’t around.

“You lost your company?” Victoria felt obligated to notice. Her obligations were infinite when it came to this matter.

“Lost your mind?” Steph snapped. “No one else is going to fix. You’ll have to.”

“Better late than never.” Victoria raised an eyebrow, then one more. “Who are you anyway?”

Steph laughed, then the room started to spin as the reality of the situation came to her. “It’s none of your business.”

“None of my business.” Victoria echoed, then another one. Her obligations were infinite, but sometimes it was nice to have a break.

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Steph was right, it was none of her business. She didn’t care who was the one in love, or who was the one feeling stupid. It was none of her business, and it was best if she let it go.


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Rachel scoffed and then yelled at some jerk, who bumped into her, spilling her drink. She put the glass on the shaky table, flicking the drops of liquid from her fingers. The sharp moves looked like a magical spell or curse that was cast on her opponent.

“Not at all.” Another tilt and a ferocious smile. Dangerous one. Amber on booze was even less predictable. “Sometimes it’s worth to wait for the good things in life.”

Victoria moved closer to the table, pretending she was just escaping from the furiously dancing mob. Her nails were tapping her beer bottle within the rhythm of the music, but she was moving nervously and agitatedly shifting around. Rachel was too tipsy to notice, but sensed something was up.

“Are you sure Price will come?” Victoria attacked again, knowing how much Amber would hate this question and how risky it was. She hated her ownership being doubted. “Chloe might be busy with somebody else, you never know, warming some other bed.”

Rachel almost pushed her. If she had crossed the thin line of total eclipse of intoxication she would get violent, maybe even slap her. Even now it was hard for her to control her anger. Victoria smiled, knowing she just found another perfect trigger, but this was a nuclear weapon, not a simple blow. Rachel approached her fast and stood so close that the Blackwell empress almost tripped over the table. The awkward move gave her the opportunity she had been waiting for. When their gazes met again, it was hard not get frightened by the fires of rage in those hazel eyes. The composure came at the last second, but Rachel couldn’t discipline herself fully any longer.

“What’s your problem, Chase?” She said directly, with pure, raw fury. “Why are you up in my ass all the time?”

Victoria was looking at her for a moment, speechless and surprised, lit up by the strobing light that painted her in red, blue, green, then red again.

“I don’t trust you.” She responded finally.

Rachel smirked with pity, wanted to grab her drink, but Victoria was blocking her way to the table and she didn’t want to push her even for a valid reason. She knew that a single physical contact would transform into one of those ugly and disgraceful cat fights. Rachel had experienced many, and learned her lesson not to get involved a long time ago on the Long Beach shore.

“Please, you don’t trust anyone.” She crossed her arms on her chest mirroring Victoria. It was hard not to notice she won this contest easily. “Why us? Why Chloe and me? Are you jealous or something?”

Victoria was certainly used to less direct questions, preferring to beat the bushes or providing sweet complements and sophisticated insults. Now she got silent and suspicious, chewing on her words, wondering how honest she should be. “No, I’m not jealous.” She responded lifting her chin, straightening up and ready to walk away. “I don’t like when people get things they don’t deserve. And you don’t deserve what you have. You don’t deserve her. Simple as that.”

It was another invitation and carrot for Amber to start proving her undying love and exhausting herself with useless and phony clarifications, but this time the fallen princess only shook her head.

“You don’t know shit, Tori.” She almost scoffed again with tamed laughter. “You don’t know shit.”

When Victoria disappeared into the crowd, Rachel finally was able to get to her drink. She looked around carefully, knowing very well how dangerous it was to leave an almost full glass of alcohol in a club, but it was a school party and only Chase was around, so she wouldn’t need to get a fresh one.
The line for booze was getting longer and it would be hard to get one of those whisky on the rocks things anyway. She took a sip and it tasted ok.

Somebody passed Rachel a freshly rolled joint. She took it, looked at it for a moment, listening to some welcoming clicking of a lighter by her side. Ah, what the hell, she can smoke one. It was just weed. Just weed. Damn it.

She exhaled, inhaled, tasting the bittersweet taste on the top of her tongue, feeling the cloud of numbness and uncontrollable laughter surround her sluggishly. Another sip of drink melted perfectly with this flavor, like the booze and weed were born together, as ultimate soulmates, an infinite match. It was too perfect not to repeat it again, and again.

Then the world got upside down.

She choked on darkness, feeling a pain in her chest. Walking a few steps, Rachel wasn’t aware of her moves all together. The glass dropped from her hand and rolled over the tailed floor. It didn’t feel right, she was about to stop feeling though, getting numb. The torpid spasm, the colorful lights, blurred vision. Don’t mix the vice, her mother had told her once. She promised to be a good girl and she was, wasn’t she?

Rachel needed to get the fuck out of there.

Kate, where the fuck was Kate? Her vision was blurred again, she had to hold onto the wall to keep her balance. Obligation, she promised. Kate had to be watched, had to be safe. Music was transforming in her body, pulsating, changing into a living creature in her veins, thoughts, fibers. It wasn’t good. Kate.

Rachel fought a long battle to focus and see the reality again. She couldn’t spot the girl, surrounded by the lights, sharp, bright, colorful strobes. “Would you like to pose for my portfolio?” Was that a real question or just an inner voice? She remembered to refuse but didn’t remember why.

Darkness. It was still there, just waiting. It was never gone fully.

Mark Jefferson gave her a look, passing quickly. His smirk was devilish, mean and evil. Was that a pair of horns on his head or just spikes of hair? Her forehead was cold, and hot, and then cold again. Music was dancing inside in filthy harmony, crashing her inside over and over again. Every thought. Thump. Dark, dark, darker. Thump. Help.

Somebody was helping Kate though. She noticed, watching as promised. Kate. The poor girl passed out. No one cared. The teacher was helping her. It was the monster with the horns or maybe an angel. Everything was going to shit anyway. The teacher should be there, right? She was supposed to provide a helpful hand, but no hands were available at the moment, out of service, sorry. Flashing sound again, new tune, new rhythm, swoosh.

Rachel had to get the fuck out there.

She hid her face in her hands, shivering and trying to overcome this madness. Chloe. Chloe was the only thing she could think of. Maybe if she could spell the name, it would be easier to remember the face behind it.

And then she saw him. Grasping the desperate bits and pieces of sobriety and sane mind she straightened up looking at Frank. Frank Bowers. Selling never ends. Rachel bent over and almost fell to her knees. The sudden spasm almost knocked her down.

He was here. Panic. Where is her girl. Chloe.
“Rach, are you ok?” Somebody offered her a helpful arm. She shook her head again, seizing the reality back, lifting herself up. It was Steph. Beautiful amazing Steph. To the rescue. Fuck. She wanted to cry.

“I don’t know.” She mumbled.

“Let’s go outside. I will get Chloe.” Hearing the name was a blessing. Somebody dragged her to the exit. It was Steph, but not only. Steph didn’t have six hands. Victoria’s smiling face, damn fucking snake. Flash. Music. Giggle. Tripping over her own legs. Sweat, yells, more bodies around her. Cables. Door. Why did the door move like that? It was silly. And then the starry sky outside. A grasp of fresh air.


Rachel looked at Steph, slowly getting back, sobering up, shaking off the worst trip of her life. Her friend was calling somebody, walking in circles back and forth with the cellphone by her ear. Rachel could sense the impatience and nervousness in her moves and a tad of disappointment. She sat down by the wall not able to stand anyway, breathing heavily. Going to the party, Rachel wanted to open a window just to get a little bit of air, but the whole storm hit her in the face instead.

It was passing slowly. Slowly. Steady. It was almost gone.

She dragged out her phone with a clumsy move, almost dropping it on the pavement. Thank God for muscle memory, it was easier to find the messages, the contact she needed.

“Come here.” Rachel texted her girl, her savior, thanking that autocorrect still turned the fuck on, and then curled up on the concrete, like a hurt animal in the middle of a forest. The only thing she could do was to wait. And cry.

***

Chloe crashed the gate to the swimming pool, jolting in. She bumped into some drunk assholes, causing spilled beer, broken bottles and more glass on the floor. They were too wasted to catch her or even yell, howling in desperation over their loss. The party was still on, not even reaching its prime. The Vortex Club created a high school haven, a college paradise with a bit of smoke, light, booze and pumping music. Chloe didn’t care nor had time to value their effort.

“Rachel!” She yelled, but the loud tune was making her mute, even if she just ripped her throat apart.

She looked around in a panic. Steph sounded very serious and she wouldn’t call if it wasn’t an emergency. Chloe’s palms were still sweaty and her face still wet from all the tears she had cried, but everything she had just gone through seemed not important, not significant at all. The night was cold, the swimming pool area not heated, but she was burning in fever anyway. A fever of impatience and fear.

“Rachel!” Chloe yelled one more time, not sure how to find her. Steph was too erratic begging her to come, she didn’t say exactly where they were.

Then she saw him. Frank Bowers. Here. How the fuck?

The panic, already reaching record high, was waved by anxiety and anger. Frank noticed her too,
when slowly walking to the entrance, probably with the intention to leave. His presence here was surprising and hazardous anyway, as was his whole sketchy business.

Chloe stood in place, not even blinking, watching the guy whom she wanted to kill, beat up and ruin, walking step by step towards her. Was he the reason behind Rachel’s terrible state? Did he give her something, did they argue again? Frank’s face was morbidly tense and his fists clinched. Chloe prepared herself for a hit, a slap or even a stab, wanting a confrontation, striving for it. It would be great to have a reason, a violent motivation to finally crash his fucking face over the swimming pool’s tails. Just close the fucking case, just to move on.

“Hell is empty.” She hissed, not aware that the thought left her lips and had been spoken.

When he was so close she could almost smell his breath filled with smoke and liquor, Frank just passed by, not stopping, ignoring her completely. He didn’t slow down, not bothering to give her a second look. Case closed. It was done.

She stood there for a frozen minute, covered with the reddened lights, painted by them, obscured in colors. And then, she remembered, oh fuck, Rachel, so she ran to the stage, passed the DJ, sound mixers, jumping over snakes of cables to reach the back entrance. That was her best guess of where to find them. Somebody tried to stop her, but she pushed him away and finally attacked the gate itself, getting out.

Chloe was lucky, it was the right place.

“Where is she?” She ran to Steph, who was pacing in place, looking around nervously. Her friend sighed with a huge relief at seeing her.

“There.” Steph pointed at a small familiar figure, sitting by the building wall with her head ducked and a smoke in hand. The blue panic wanted to run to Rachel but got stopped in half-step. “Chloe, I think somebody gave her something.” Steph looked worried, no she was terrified and damn fucking serious. Chloe had never seen her like that.

“You mean she got a fix?” She asked, taming her urge to get to her girl, take her in her arms, hug, protect, console. “Who?” She demanded an explanation, still remembering Frank passing by.

“Your guess is as good as mine, but I don’t think Rachel was aware of it.” Steph had to put a lot of strength in her peaceful grasp of Chloe’s shoulder, keeping her in place. She was shaking too, tense and damn freaking scared. “I think she got something slipped in her drink. Rach was fine the whole evening and then just almost dropped dead. It didn’t look like, you know, planned. She’s fine now, but damn, it was scary. I was close to call 911.”

“Fuck. Thanks, Steph.” Chloe gave her a quick, erratic bear hug, watching Rachel with terror and remorse, but was stopped yet again.

“How is Max?” Steph asked.

“Not good.” She bit her lip, feeling guilty for not mentioning it earlier. Chloe had stormed out of their room just after getting the call, leaving her friend alone. It wasn’t surprising that Steph was concerned. “Her fever is rising. Are you done for tonight?”

“Yeah, just finished.” Steph was ready to pull off. “Damn. I’m gonna go. Take care of your girl.” They parted running in separate ways, both fretted and anxious. Being in a relationship was so damn distressing sometimes.

The backdoor entrance was always intimate, like a secret gate to a different world, a hidden garden
of muffled sounds and mysterious equipment, unseen from everybody else. Chloe was more than grateful that she didn’t have to deal with the situation by the main gate in front of everybody. It was better to keep it as private as possible. Intimate.

Rachel was sobbing. She was crying her eyes out, sitting on the concrete pavement, shaking, sniffing and wiping the tears away. Even in this state, even so fallen and lost she was so damn beautiful. Chloe was too concerned to sigh in amazement, but her girl really tried to enchant the whole school tonight. Too bad she couldn’t be by her side when Rachel walked into this party. Too bad she couldn’t protect her from all the horrors after.

“Baby, are you ok?” She knelt by her side and Rachel just threw herself into her arms desperately, dragging her closer and sobbing even more. Her smoke died on the street, forgotten and not done. She didn’t care. Nothing else mattered, but Chloe.

“No, I’m not.” She sniffed. “Sorry, I’m a little bit drunk.” Chloe tried to help her get up, but Rachel was still dizzy and almost fell to her knees again. Her girl caught her in the last moment.

“Not a little, you barely can stand.”

It was better to sit down for now, even if on a bare, cold concrete. Chloe fretfully was doing everything she could to protect, to cover her with her own jacket, comfort, shield. The overwhelming scent of jasmine was still beating the smell of booze and beer. Rachel hid her face in Chloe’s shirt, still sobbing and weeping like a little girl. She was trembling feverishly, close to a mental breakdown.

“It’s fine. I just got… I don’t know what it was.” Rachel tried to make her voice sound stable, but failed in another cry. Chloe was still cuddling her close, but when the blonde looked at her, she snapped rapidly. “It’s just booze, ok? Don’t give me that look, I didn’t take anything.”

“I would never fucking suggest you did.” The blue-haired pirate sighed not letting her go. “I’m just worried.”

They were sitting in silence for a moment, looking at those sarcastic little assholes called stars, counting to infinity and synchronizing their breaths. Rachel’s sobbing was less rapid, weakening with every minute passed, but she kept her face hidden. She didn’t want to look at Chloe, she didn’t want to see her own reflection in her eyes.

“Alright I smoked one, blame me.” Rachel confessed, and, as always, attacked just after. “You’ve been smoking too, I know.”

They both knew the weed wasn’t the issue. Whatever made Rachel to fade down so hard, it couldn’t be just one small joint. It had to be way worse, way scarier and way stronger, acting fast and rapid and burning down quickly. They both could guess at least a few drugs working that way, but no one was brave enough to call them out. Chloe could feel the side effects in small spasms under her girl’s skin.

“Yeah, I did a few times. Sorry, I should’ve told you.” She answered to the accusation with simple honesty. It was stupid to hide the weed from Rachel, but she didn’t know how to talk about it and not make it awkward. Her girl was extremely jealous over this fan club of hers already and adding another debatable piece to this music box of problems didn’t seem practical. It wasn’t the right time or place, never had been, but Chloe sighed deeply, deciding to discuss it a little bit. “Listen, if you are pissed off because of those kids I can tell them to go fuck themselves even now. I don’t want you to worry or do something weird because of it. I don’t give a single fuck about those people and the fucking popularity thing.”
“Yeah, well, I don’t mind them but maybe you should tell your little association that you’re fucking taken!” Rachel got up finally, freeing herself from the loving arms, using the wall as the main lift. It wasn’t a gracious rise, but she was able to feel her legs again, not freezing her ass off on the ground.

“I did!” Chloe got back on her feet too, standing just by her side.

Her girl shook her head. The blue earring danced in the night cold air. “You don’t get it.”

There were so many thoughts, layers, problems, issues, everything at once, that it was hard to mark the starting line. Rachel knew she was acting irrationally, presenting her bitchy side to the most amazing girl on earth, who just dropped everything and came to her rescue. It made her feel sick, tired and helpless. Every beginning of a sentence seemed uneven.

Chloe was running out of patience though. She had never owned a lot of this precious natural resource, had used a decent amount during her talk with Max and now she was just plainly, heatedly fed up. Frank, drugs, being wasted, the fucking emergency, and now an argument about something so not important at all. “What’s your problem, Rach?” She snapped.

“I don’t know. I have too many.” Her girl opened her hands wildly and laughed with a bitter creak. She tried to take a step back, step forward, the direction didn’t matter, and she succeeded at last. Her body was working again, good news.

“It’s ok, Rach, I’m here.” Chloe closed her in an embrace, not so sweet and persistent this time, subduing the annoyance. It was better to reschedule this talk for a more sober time. “You are done for tonight. Let’s get back home.” She wasn’t even sure if she meant the dorm or her bedroom. Her definition of home changed constantly, depending where Rachel was. Her girl and a comfy bed would suffice to be called by this term.

“We can’t.” Rachel shook her head, thoughtful this time. “We have to keep an eye on Kate.” They really should check on this girl. She vaguely remembered that something had happened to her, but she couldn’t recall what exactly. It was associated with some horns, colors changing, and weird, anxious laughs. Damn fucking trip. She got worried about Kate again, feeling a decent amount of guilt for not keeping their promise. Not her fault completely, but they should investigate and check on Max’s neighbor.

“Fuck Kate!” Chloe almost yelled. Rachel opened her eyes widely in shock. Her girl was so done with today and with the promises in particular. “She’s a grown up and in college. She has to learn how to deal with her shit for fuck’s sake. I need to take care of you. Stop just…” Chloe raised her hands, shaken and furious, not sure how to release her wrath. “Stop being responsible for one fucking minute! Let me help you!”

“I will be fine.” Rachel lied, and then looked at Chloe still in shock and surprise. “I just need you here. I just need you to tell me that everything will be ok.” And her voice broke in a cry again.

Her amazing, beautiful and angry as fuck girlfriend came closer, brushed off an invisible dust from her hair, like after their first kiss years ago, and then trapped her in her arms again.

“It will be ok, sunshine. Everything will be ok.”

***
“Everything will be ok,” said Victoria Chase, sitting by the best table at the party and browsing the photos in her phone, with a satisfied smile. She looked around trying to find Nathan, but her dear friend had vanished along with the religious girl. Maybe she wasn’t that religious after all. The sting of jealousy bothered her for a moment, she had to stretch her back to brush off the throbbing ache, but the photos she had taken today improved her mood at once. She was still hoping for more entertainment though.

“Everything will be ok,” said Steph, still concerned while checking Max’s temperature. Her girl was breathing slowly, wandering between nightmares, shaking between the sheets. It was almost time to give her another dose of meds. Max was always fragile, she didn’t get sick very often though, but no antibiotic seemed to work and it was worrying to say the least.

“Everything will be ok.” Nathan whispered to Kate’s ear when she unconsciously was laying on the backseat of his car. He smiled, brushing her cheek lightly, and jumped on the driver’s seat, turning the engine on and drove off from Blackwell’s parking lot.

***

“Let’s… walk a little bit. I need to shake it off.” Rachel got cold, so she wrapped herself in Chloe’s jacket and her own arms, testing her quite new ability to walk. The echo resonated loudly, as the high heels played the steady beat of her steps. She reached for a smoke, lit up, inhaled, planning to get back inside when ready.

“Are you sure?” Chloe, aware of her intention, was pretty certain it wasn’t a good idea, but followed her anyway. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

She put hand on her shoulder, trying to support, kidnap her home, far away from all the horrors here, thinking that the worst part of this evening was done. Boy, she was wrong. Rachel stopped suddenly, froze in place. Exhale, inhale, damn, she was shaking. Rachel always knew she had been made from broken pieces like a kaleidoscope bought at a flea market, and it was so easy to shatter herself to bits. Only a few tensed strings were tying all this mess of herself together, and she had to loosen them or would break down entirely.

“Yeah, I know what I’m doing all the fucking time.” Rachel was speaking quickly, snapping her fingers over the smoke. “Every single step planned, like every single fucking word I say... I have to be careful. I always have to know what to do and it’s draining as hell. I’m so tired of being careful. I have to control everything otherwise it will fucking tear apart. The school, and my father, those assholes and us… The fucking fear that something’s gonna go wrong and I would have to start from scratch and go through this shit again.” She was crying, not sure why and what for, not being able to stop this waterfall of words, of regrets and tears. She was out of control again, ready to burn another forest, rip herself apart, gauging those emotions out, just to get rid of everything.

“You don’t have to control shit.” Chloe looked terrified, while her eyes grew bigger. “You’re melting the fuck down.” She tried to get closer, comfort Rachel, give her support, but the unspoken intent got rejected with one weak gesture.

“Maybe I just need a fucking melt down. Just…” The blonde sobbed one more time and leaned against the wall, feeding on the smoke fast, quickly, like it was a last supper.

There was more to it.
The parking lot behind the fence got filled with people too drunk to drive and too sober to stay quiet. Yelling and screaming the students crowded around the RV, buying more pleasure and bliss. The night was fully blooming with street lights, security patrols and silent murmur of crickets competing with the pumping echo of the party. The high beams of the cars passing by the street by the school were glimpsing through both of them, disturbing the intimacy of the evening, breaking it down in half.

“Sunshine, trust me.” Chloe walked to her girl, opening her arms again, offering a safe harbor, a promise of peace. “Please trust me. We’re in it together. You just have to be honest.” She desperately tried to end this, get back to the smiles and tender kisses, to feel good and certain again. She felt like shit now.

Rachel scoffed and looked at her with sorrow, pain and anger, scared by her own fury. “Honesty goes both ways, Chloe.”

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Kate was about to fly. The flickering light, then complete darkness seemed natural. She had no experience in partying or clubbing, but it was an amusing, fluffy feeling to be blind and curled up, just like on her mother’s lap. Somebody said, “Get her out.” And just like in one of the Bible’s stories, the deeds followed the divine order. Her body was in motion, but she wasn’t in control of it. She could smell Nathan’s cologne, his panting breath. Was she supposed to be worried? He always smelled so nice.

This sound reminded her of a car door closing. Beep, like an alarm activation. But she was flying and cars couldn’t fly, right?

She could feel hands on her ankles and shoulders, not caressing but holding firmly, protecting from a fall. They were leading her somewhere, taking her away, but was it a bad thing?

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“Are you still jealous because of those assholes?” Chloe asked, still tense, finally being able to light up a cigarette. Their grey clouds of smoke met in the middle and then disappeared in the lights of a passing car.

“I’m hella jealous in general.” Rachel turned her head away, still sobering up, stopping herself from vomiting those complains and rants, but there was still one more thorn, one more thing she couldn’t just ignore. She was sick of the lies and semi-truths, of weird encounters and silent explanations. She just wanted to blurt everything out, not giving a fuck about the consequences.

“You know why and because of what.” She added with a supposedly calm voice, being miles away from being serene, as was proved by the rapid and furious exhale of a grey dragon. Rachel was surprised she didn’t breathe with fire at this point.

Chloe grinned her teeth, and her eyes flashed with ire when another ray of car lights draped her for a second. She knew faultlessly well how many times she avoided a reply, how much contriving it
costed to nourish them both with another excuse. It felt like ash and betrayal though, a tasteless victory. Rachel wasn’t the only one who lost control tonight.

“You really want to get into this now? Max is sick, in her fucking bed with her girlfriend!” Chloe yelled finally in frustration.

***

They put her on the floor and she landed in grace and harmony. The ground felt nice, cooling her skin, providing solace. She discovered the space only with the sense of smell, not able to move, see or even hear well. Oxygen, sweat, a familiar male cologne. Nathan was here, protecting, she could sense him moving, hustling around in a hurry. This gentle boy by was always doing everything to provide, to be her angel and savior. She was so lucky.

“It’s time. She’s ready and we can’t delay it any longer” Kate heard a recognizable voice, but the benefit or recognition was beyond her reach. She felt something sticky, tying her wrist, another sharp move of her body she had no intention to make and the familiar voice spoke again. “Set up the lights and pass me the camera.”

Camera? There were no cameras in heaven. No cameras in the secret, serene place she was at the moment. She had to hear it wrong, her senses were useless anyway.

“Be careful!” Somebody yelled. “Be careful! Fuck!”

***

“Fuck!” Rachel screamed, turned around, but then looked at her again pointing a finger. “I opened myself up about hella everything. You dragged out every single detail about me and Frank. Everything!” She cried.

The echo of her scream was bouncing from the brick wall of the swimming pool building. Somebody yelled from the parking lot wishing them politely to shut the fuck up. The lights of the passing cars were lighting them in the dark, turning their facial features on and off. Chloe’s tired eyes, Rachel’s waiting sight. They both were appearing and vanishing, depending on random vehicles on the street.

“I had the right.” The blue-haired rebel straightened up proudly but took a step back. Her whole face was hidden in darkness, covering all her anxieties and leaving only the shadow outline full of confidence.

“Damn right, you had the right!” Rachel yelled again. “But tell me the fucking truth!”

***
FLASH

Kate felt it more than saw it, curling on the white floor. The world was changing into white and black, over and over again. She tried to rise again, just like before, release herself from those sticky ties, but she wasn’t sure if that was a right decision. Everything felt like destiny, like fate, tasted like a laser printer and negatives.

FLASH

There were no cameras in heaven.

***

Chloe rose her hands trying to stop it from escalating further. Rachel had been hella enduring for months not pushing and not questioning the weirdness between the former childhood friends, but it was time to finally clear the air, even if they both wished it would happen under different circumstances. On the other had there was no perfect time and place for erasing such doubts in a more honest matter than a drunken night on the backstage of a party.

“I was confused, alright? I didn’t know shit and needed time to figure it out. I thought it was more, but it wasn’t. It wasn’t.” She repeated just in case. “You left me, we almost broke up. But whatever was between me and her, it’s done.” Chloe sharply shook her head, remembering the horror of today’s talk. It occurred a thousand years ago, at least it seemed that way. “Zero. Zip. None. Max and I found a way to talk like normal people, no strings attached. That’s it. Northing’s left. Nothing else. Are you fucking satisfied?” She didn’t want to raise her voice but she was almost screaming at the end.

“Yes!” Rachel screamed back.

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FLASH

“She might be too aware. Give her another dose. Just be careful.” She heard. Then a sting, a sharp, quick pain and she began to fly again. “Be careful!” Somebody yelled.

***

“Yes.” Rachel repeated quietly and started to pace again in circles, not crossing the invisible line dividing them. She was so tempted to just end it, wave it away, laugh it off, but she just couldn’t fucking stop. “Yes, I’m fucking satisfied. I knew that something was going on, I fucking knew it. You can’t ask me to be hella open about everything and then hide shit. Max, weed, whatever. You can’t, it’s not fair.”
The steam of anger disappeared into the night’s fog and Chloe got lenient finally, even if still feeling like a traitor. She hadn’t played fair lately, mostly taking, not giving. The blue-haired worry sighed. It was easier to be angry than to calm the fuck down. “I know. I’m an asshole.” She confirmed sadly.

“Yes, you are a fucking asshole sometimes.” Rachel was too livid too cry, even if she really felt like it. Fighting for her soberness and clear head, she wished to be way more drunk at the same time. The privilege of being inconsistent and a fucked up mess. The famous RV, surrounded by stoned kids reminded her of one more argument, a wretched and uncomfortable blow. “You don’t have to see Frank at all, and I have to deal with her every single day. It’s so frustrating, you have no idea. The thought that she would jump into your bed if I’m not around is…”

Rachel crossed the line. Chloe’s eyes burned in the worst possible fire. “No one would jump into my bed or into my pants just because you stop watching me! I’m not a bitch that whores around if my girl is not present. I have always been loyal. I have always been faithful. Always! Scratch Max out of it, because it’s plainly stupid!”

“It is! I know!”

They stood there for a moment, surrounded by the sloshed cheers from the parking lot, the pulsating rhythm of the party, the tire scratches of cars passing the school, the crickets in the woods. All the sounds were mixing together in an uncomfortable, dead silence.

There was more to it.

“You still can’t forgive yourself.” Chloe bit her lip, looking down at her worn shoes. She walked a long way to understand what was bothering her girlfriend. Months of fucking wandering around, and she finally got there. Understood.

“So? And you still can’t trust me.” Rachel was still avoiding any sign of intimacy, any kind of touch of closeness.

She put up with every single problem alone for months, begging Chloe to stay, to forgive her, to prove that another chance was possible. She was working hard and still felt like everything was getting out of hand, out of control. It was just too much.

“I’m trying!” Chloe didn’t want to yell.

“Fuck, me too!” Rachel didn’t want to yell either. “Don’t you see it?”

***

FLASH. FLASH. FLASH.

“The innocence dies in darkness and lack of control. When the transformation is overturned, from the butterfly to the caterpillar, you can watch the whole world turned upside down. She became a saint, just to change into a dirty whore. A filthy harmony, two sides of the same coin. Do you understand? Do you see how important it is? We overturned it, we spun it around. Can you see it, Nathan? Can you see it?”

FLASH
“I can see it.” Chloe was choking on her tears. She didn’t even notice when she started to cry like a little fucking kid. “I can see it every day. It’s too much for you to bear, I know. I try too. I trust you, really. I learned how to do it again. I put everything on you Rachel, everything. My whole life.”

Her world was spinning in circles, when she boarded this horrid train through the ups of anger to the downs of fucking guilt. She had chosen to be blind for months, mercifully letting Rachel to lead blindly and deal with everything, content that she had not been involved. Things were going so fast, too fast, and her girl was the only one struggling. The Ambers, the California trip, begging her mother to stay in the house, organizing the dorm, dealing with the principal, the constant fights with Victoria, the estranged friends or no friends at all and Max’s weird premonitions and double-meaning messages. It was more than enough for a girl who just had walked out of rehab only a few months ago and now was attending the most advanced pre-law classes on campus. Chloe wanted to yell, true. At herself.

“But you can’t just walk this path alone dragging me behind, like a fucking monkey.” The blue-haired rebel took a step closer, not rebellious this time. “We are together, we fought for this shit, both of us. We both worked super hard. I made mistakes, you made mistakes, but we are still here. From day one, remember?” One more step. Rachel didn’t back off, waiting. “Don’t stress over school, over those idiots and over me. I’m not dropping out, not leaving you. Not ever, do you understand? Start fucking living again, Rachel. Don’t fucking close yourself down. What are you afraid of? What are you running away from?” She begged for an answer.

Her girl thought about the response for a while. It wasn’t just hesitation from being sincere, it was the need to describe herself properly, find a good label, write something on a tag, marking her fucked up feelings.

“That this will end.” She answered slowly. “That everything will end.”

Fuck the invisible line between them. Chloe walked to her, prepared to be pushed away, punished for getting too close, but Rachel was waiting for it as much as she. It felt right after all this fucking ride.

“Us? Not a chance.” The blue-haired pirate smiled, laughed almost. “The whole world can go to shit, but not us. You can’t run away from me.”

“I wish I could erase all that shit that I did to you.” She held Chloe’s closer, thankful for crossing the border, for being her brave fucking hero once again. “That I did wrong.”

Chloe sighed deeply, feeling how cold the night got already. “You can’t fucking erase it. It doesn’t work that way. We just have to live with it and move on. It happened. Done. You always try to protect me, like a fucking knight in shining armor. I don’t need that shit, I want my woman, my girl. I want you back. You forgot about yourself in this.”

“The darkness will get me.” They were both scared of this possibility. Scared to death. “It will try to get me again.”

“It won’t. It won’t, sunshine.” Chloe promised.
FLASH. Stop. FLASH. FLASH.

Kate’s blind eyes were open, her limbs numb and paralyzed. Nathan was pacing around the studio nervously looking at his watch. The first excitement wore him down, he needed his meds, and wanted to go home. Today’s project, even if anticipated and much valued, was taking too long.

FLASH

His partner in crime finished with the last great shot. He looked at this object one more time tilting his head and then ordered. “It’s done. You did good. Take her home. The end.”

***

It almost felt like another end of the world, another talk that seemed to be the last and final, an edge of a cliff, but it became refreshing, uplifting and inspiring. Somebody opened the backstage door, saw them, groaned and got back inside. The yells at the parking lot got louder for a moment, howling in disappointment when the RV finally drove off. It was a clear sign to get back home, finish the adventure, stop the journey.

They both didn’t care. It was hard to stand there, without any support, much needed after a long fucking day so they sat on the ground again, despite of the hard and cold surface.

“I’m a fucking mess right now, sorry.” Rachel smiled shyly, still feeling the bites of dried tears on her face. “I try and try. I just don’t know what to do sometimes.”

“Hey, everything is ok, we are ok.” Chloe hugged her, promising herself to care, to notice. She made so many fucking promises today, she would have to buy a notepad to track them down after. “You can’t live like that, Rachel, life is not a fucking competition. I’m not your prize, but your girlfriend. Your partner.” She kissed her forehead in the most delicate and caring manner. “I’m here alright? Maybe I wasn’t dealing with this stuff very well before, but I’m here.”

Ashamed. It was a perfect word to describe how Rachel felt tonight. First, she tried to get her old world back, to conquer again, and then the fall, the damn fucking trip, the worst argument in months. Error after error, and Chloe was still here, constantly supporting and loving. Maybe Victoria was right after all. Maybe she didn’t fucking deserve it all.

“I felt alone with all of it.” Rachel whispered, sharing the most painful thing. She was never afraid of challenges, but never wanted to walk through this path unaccompanied. Not since one magical summer three years ago.

“You are not alone.” Chloe answered, feeling the intensifying drizzle. Oregon falls were usually cold and rainy after all, it was time for the sky to cry a little too. “You’ve never been alone. Rachel, please. Let me take care of it. Share. You can’t deal with all that shit by yourself. It’s impossible, and if you break down, it will fuck me up.”

Rachel’s breath was getting calmer, steadier, when she was finally shrugging off the sign of the evening traumas and rapid attacks, “I would be fucked up too. I’m not really good at dealing with
this shit, am I?” She smiled, looking at Chloe. Rachel wanted to apologize for this fucking breakdown, but they both needed it somehow. They both needed to explode, yell, scream and find themselves in drizzling ashes again.

“You are doing too good, actually. You amaze me every day.” Her girl, her personal savior, was sitting on the cold concrete, stroking her arm and playing with a lock of her hair. It left Rachel speechless. An unusually usual reaction.

“I love you.” She murmured into Chloe’s shirt. This shirt was now stained with her make-up and entirely wet from her tears. Her poor girl, robbed out of her jacket before, was shaking a little. Rachel hugged her closer to protect from the nipping breeze, to warm up.

“I love you too.” Came the response, with a soft soothing tone. Rachel couldn’t believe that Chloe was able to yell at her a few moments ago. It seemed abnormal, unrealistic, but it really happened. Thank God it did.

“Now shut the fuck up and kiss me...” She asked and got a small peck on her lips. Rachel giggled and shook her head. “No, no, no. Really kiss me.” She demanded and all her passion and fire was put into a good use again. She really didn’t want to moan, Chloe didn’t want to moan either, but it happened, as always. Rachel got lifted up, still with her lips locked in a kiss. Damn, her girl was strong. Chloe probably got tired of sitting on the wet fucking pavement.

It was time to go anyway.

“Hey, what are doing?” Rachel asked with a short giggle, when they broke off, gasping for air. She expected to get back to the party or even to the dorms, but her girlfriend with one smooth move dragged her closer, put one of her hands on her shoulder, grasping the other, and then she started fucking dancing. Slowly. Not tuning to any rhythm, nor any pumping base. It was their music, their song, and they got it perfectly somehow.

“Taking control.” Chloe whispered in her ear, still embarrassed a bit, but her grip was firm. “Somebody has to fucking lead. You are done for today, sunshine.”

***

Nathan lurked into the hallway and then sighed with relief. He almost stopped breathing, alert and scared that somebody might see him. Kate was still unconscious, he had to carry her like a wedded wife through the whole corridor, and then put her on the ground to find the keys. People had only two hands, she had to wait on the floor when he was unlocking the room. No one offered him help, but it would be troubling if somebody tried.

The dorm was empty and ominously silent on a Friday night. It was why they picked this evening for the operation. The transformation Nathan experienced, was mesmerizing, the venture absorbing, but it was time to clean up, erase all the tracks, put everything in order. It was his job, he was forced to do it, controlled on every step and instructed on the details.

He finally put her on the bed, still senseless and paralyzed. Kate looked beautiful in her innocence and ignorance, he couldn’t stop watching. It was forbidden to take any step further, he was told to leave her there and get back, but something forced him to change the guidelines, to be insubordinate, shrug the leash of control and do what his sick desire wanted him to do.
“Ah, what the hell.” He smiled rakishly, and then turned back, vanishing inside of Kate’s room taking his jacket off. The soft hum of the main theme from “The Sound of Music” curved the silence outside, but no one noticed. No one was there. The rare melody, so nice and soothing was dying in quick preparations and ugly fast breaths, panting, a sharp relief, in horror.

He wasn’t a good boy anymore. She wasn’t a saint. No flash involved.

It was time to get up and leave. Escape, cry, laugh, blame and go crazy. He jolted out of the room and ran as fast as he could, forgetting about covering all his tracks this time.

The slammed door woke Steph up, who sat on the bed and listened carefully. The horror had happened only a few feet away, but even if ugly and despicable, it was silent. Too silent. No one made another statement, another proclamation, no one noticed what was occurring behind the closed door to room 222.

Steph, even if awoken by her intuition, looked at Max, touched her forehead and adjusted the blanket, confident that the fever had gone down and her girlfriend was feeling better. “It will be alright” she whispered, and went back to sleep.

***

The party had ended, the rain was just starting. The parking lot got empty and the annoying fucking cars didn’t pass by so intensely anymore. They were alone on this improvised backstage, between the brick wall and metal fence and it felt damn fucking good to be there, imprint the memory of a slow clumsy dance on a wet, cold street.

“Damn, you are hella romantic, baby.” Rachel sighed deeply with a pure joy this time, not aware that her smeared make-up made her even more beautiful. She was romantic herself, but rarely acted on it, preferring passion, taming, burning and all the fire. She almost forgot how calm you could be in somebody’s arms just moving slowly to an improvised rhythm, not running nor hurrying, leaving everything behind.

“I have some good secrets too.” Chloe smirked. She obviously did something good, and it would be nice to repeat it from time to time. Seeing her girl rising from the shattered pieces and putting herself together collecting all the missing bits was rewarding and felt peaceful. She was right after all, everything could go to shit but not them, not when together.

She recalled all the late nights when her dad was leading her mom in a slow, evening dance brushing off all the tiring arguments and problems at work, only repeating a few steps around the living room. If it was working for them, it could work for her and Rachel too.

“You think Kate’s gonna be ok?” Her girl had to ask, even if it could ruin the mood.

“Yeah, I think she will be just fucking fine, sunshine.” It didn’t ruin it, but Chloe wasn’t up to check on Max’s friend anytime soon. Their obligation wasn’t fulfilled, the trust and hope in them was broken, but she had to choose today and didn’t even hesitate on which promise to keep.

Chloe truly believed Kate was drunk, safe and sleeping soundly in her room. Boy, she couldn’t be more wrong. The rain intensified a little bit, and then changed back to a drizzle. Every sane person would get back to the dorm and then continue, but those two valued magical moments more than their comfort.
“Sunshine… Why do you call me sunshine all the time?” Rachel asked randomly, still moving with their rhythm, still mesmerized and fascinated. Her girl really knew how to wonder and get her stunned.

“Not all the time.” Chloe corrected with a broad and confident smile. “This is a secret I will tell you one day. A very special day. And now shut up and let me lead.”

***

Victoria Chase was getting back to her dorm, smiling with triumph and victory. The heavy glass door cracked when she pushed it, and the hollow sound filled the corridor along with her slow, steady steps. She didn’t have to inspect anything and investigate anybody, being alone between the empty rooms and a few dead asleep lieges.

She frowned when she noticed Nathan’s jacket by Kate’s floor, lying on the dark carpet like the worn skin of a dead snake. Shaking her head, she grabbed it and took it with her, promising herself to talk to her friend tomorrow and this time seriously demand the explanation. This little affair of his was getting out of hand.

Victoria had a reason to smile regardless. Looking at her phone, she was replaying the video she took today, the ultimate proof of her mastermind intrigue. It felt so good to re-watch the fall of the forbidden Blackwell princess dropping to her knees, drugged, drunk, obnoxious, then dragged out, out of control, out of mind. It was a pleasant award for all her hard work. It was pleasant to have this card in her sleeve and being able to play it anytime she wanted.

Victoria knew she finally got a chance to destroy Rachel Amber’s bight future.
Chloe looked at her distorted reflection in the white, shiny, paint-covered simple door to the dorm room. Her uncombed hair lurked out of the beanie creating a chaotic mess, shading her tired and sleepy eyes and spreading out in every direction like blue spikes of a pirate hedgehog. Chloe never liked her own reflection, and now, when the glossy glimpse of white cover was disturbing her own image, she felt even more out of place than usual. She knocked a few more times, but silence was her only answer. Suddenly she felt very brave for doing so, crossing an imaginary line of misfits and taking action. Too brave.

The entrance to Kate’s private space looked like every other one. A wooden frame, white scratched paint, simple metal handle, uneven threshold hidden behind a dirty gray carpet. Nothing special and unique about it, but yet the door seemed ominous, portentous and creepy.

“It doesn’t look good.” Chloe stepped back and shook her head. The blue spikes moved slowly, still too stubborn to behave properly. The privileges of getting up too early. Steph, who was leaning against the opposite wall nodded and took another bite of an apple.

“It doesn’t.” She agreed and kept watching the entrance thoughtfully.

The day was still young, barely reaching high noon, still dragging the sun up, providing a decent amount of refreshing morning light. September was sometimes too generous to Blackwell students, especially those who partied hard last night and would really appreciate some cloudy skies and a tactfully respectful shadow. The treat of being a Blackwell elite included a hangover every Sunday morning and a request for the blinds to be shot down, the drapes drawn and a glass of cold water served. Steph and Chloe were the only ones up, but they got their decent share of a party fever on Friday and this time they could triumph over all the drunk victims of the Vortex Club.

Spending this beautiful morning in the hallway, without any hope for a successful outcome was a ridiculous idea, but they didn’t want to break the moment and get back to the room. Responsibility and a slight sense of guilt kept them in place, even if they both acted carefree and lighthearted. They hoped for a damn sound, noise, even a scratch from the inside of Kate’s room, a small sign of normality, instead of getting back to Max, to eat some waffles that Chloe had brought today, to laugh and joke around.

“She hasn’t even left her room for like two days.” Steph sighed and got another bite of an apple. “Well, except to go to the bathroom and stuff. I couldn’t even catch her, she sneaks out like a freaking assassin avoiding everybody. She even skipped the mass today.”

“I didn’t know that you were so up to date with the church’s schedule.” Chloe smirked, bulking the pockets of her jacket with her fists. She hoped the irony would clear the air from a breeze of blame and gust of tension, but nothing had changed.

“I’m not, but her getting ready every Sunday was usually a big thing.” Steph really enjoyed all the homemade breakfast delivered to them from Price’s house today. She didn’t have to ask to know it was a gift from Rachel. Chloe couldn’t cook shit. “You would notice if you ever stayed over the weekend. Or maybe you wouldn’t.” She winked at her blue-haired friend and observed the small blush with a welcoming satisfaction. “Anyway, she skipped for the first time ever.”

“Pretty long fucking hangover.” Chloe cleaned her throat, worrying more than she really should have. She wasn’t sure if the broken promise of keeping an eye on Kate was bothering her more or the fact that the girl could have gotten into trouble two days ago. “Do you think something might
have happened to her?”

“Well, I don’t know, this party was pretty crazy.” Steph shrugged, almost done with the fruit. “Maybe.” She added chewing slowly. “Some people said Kate even kissed a few guys being drunk. It was a weird night for a lot of people.”

An obvious hint to the situation between the most noticeable Blackwell couple was intentionally ignored by Chloe, who decided not to touch Rachel’s part of the weirdness. Not yet anyway. Her girlfriend was clearly embarrassed and ashamed of the ado she caused. It was partly why she prepared so much food and sent her here to deliver, not keen to show up herself. The obvious explanation for such a kind gesture was a proper meal for Max to help her recover, but Chloe didn’t have to ask to know how remorseful Rachel really was. She agreed to visit their friends in Blackwell, even if it meant getting up at a horrendous hour and taking a shower alone, breaking the Sunday typical routine.

“Kissed a few guys? It doesn’t seem... like Kate.” Chloe murmured, lurking at the door, still closed, still silent. Maybe they should try to knock one more time.

“As far as we know.” Steph looked at the remains of the apple with a pure sadness, and then got back to the most urgent issue. “Maybe she just wants to be left alone, going through some shit she doesn’t want to talk about. New life, college, dorm, boys. It doesn’t have to be the party. People have to revalue their whole life sometimes. Happens. I don’t know her that well though. Max met up with her a few times, mostly for gossip and stuff, but I don’t think they shared all the deepest secrets. They ain’t BFFs, even if Max is stating that she knows her very well.” Her suppositions sounded reasonable, but didn’t calm them down. On the contrary. Chloe stretched her arms in a nervous, awkward move.

“Max likes to state that about people sometimes.”

“I’ve noticed.” Steph didn’t want to discuss her girlfriend’s premonitions and warnings, taking them all with a grain of salt. It was getting more and more troubling and Chloe could see how it affected their relationship. The topic wasn’t up for discussion though. “Kate might have a problem to confront anybody or even look at herself in the mirror after all the wild shit she’s done. Religious devotion and half a bottle of whisky don’t go very well together, especially for somebody like her. She really believes in her stuff and is very dedicated. It’s a harsh place for people believing in something other than themselves.”

Mentioning religion made Chloe even more uncomfortable. She was never questioning or deliberating on somebody’s beliefs, despite of lack of any friends or acquaintances who were really involved in their rites, but she preferred not to discuss her own engagement. Her family had been religious once, not to a devoted state though, but Joyce tried to raise her daughter with good morals and William wouldn’t touch a plate on the table without saying grace. When Chloe’s father died and her uncle moved to Utah, the faith had been abandoned simultaneously by the grieving leftovers of the family. The issue was never mentioned or considered, even if David, an old-fashioned southerner, tried to make them return to the weekly church routine. The situation got even more complicated with Rachel in the picture. Them being together was enough to cut off all the religious conversations in the household.

Chloe wasn’t even sure if she believed in anything anymore, therefore everybody who was so strong in their faith was making her awkward and disaffected. Religion felt like a forgotten part of her life, which she had closed in a box, put under her bed and never dared to open and explore again. It might be empty, have a piece of good old memories and a dust of hope, or could be a pure treasure. Whatever it was, she decided to ignore it all the way.
Steph gave her time and space to think, but when she noticed her friend’s thoughts wandered too far and her moves became obdurate, she sighed changing slightly the course of the talk. “I hope Kate won’t get shit because of this kissing stuff. It’s easy for people to pick on her now.”

“You mean Victoria?” Chloe lifted her head, alert and immediately annoyed. The confrontation with the fashion snake was way overdone and the blue-haired rebel just waited for a good excuse to unleash her anger.

“Uh-huh.” Steph threw out the apple core and wiped her hands in a paper tissue. Chloe would probably use her shirt instead. “She would totally go all the fucking paparazzo on Kate, you know this bitch. Luckily or not, she was busy with Rachel taking pics and shit. If your girl hadn’t stolen the show Victoria would be on Kate the whole evening. It doesn’t mean she won’t be in the future though, especially if your girlfriend would chop off one of the heads of this hydra and win one of those morning battles.”

Chloe, hearing the news, forgot about Kate entirely. “Wait, what? What pics of Rachel?”

“When she faded out Vicki was taking some photos, videos and stuff always up to drama. She kept going with this annoying flash when we were dragging Rach out of there. Be careful about it though. Victoria is planning something. I don’t know what, but she looked super happy after the party. She might have gotten some incriminating stuff.” Steph explained, trying to sound unconcerned, but Chloe’s hands grasped into fists so hard her knuckles went white.

“Alright, I’m done.” She snapped and started to walk fast in circles to release some of the steam. It was yet another annoying thing today that hit her hard. “I’m gonna find her and ask her some serious fucking questions. I’m tired of this never-ending war and fights about nothing. Rachel is not into this popularity contest thing anymore, she’s not her competition, she ditched that shit and this dumb snake is always trying to bite her ass.”

“Popularity?” Steph frowned and tossed the tissue away. “That’s what you think it is about? Maybe you should discuss some stuff with your girlfriend again.”

Chloe stopped, baffled and confused. The anger was still blazing in her eyes, the jaw still clenched, but the good humor prevailed over a need of hitting a wall. “You mean in more domestic circumstances?”

“As domestic or public, depends on your preference.” Steph winked. They both knew each other pretty well, and she was perfectly aware of how fierce this couple could be. “I don’t mind you yelling at each other backstage, I got used to it in the past 3 years. Anyway, I’m not sure what this whole thing is about but I guess Rach is having a hard time, because she is gay. Don’t get triggered and don’t tell me you will kill Victoria, please.” She finished with a shade of a warning in her smirk.

The revelations, that had been vague suspicions previously, erased the blue smile and all the oddments of a cheerful mood.

“Oh, I will kill her.” Chloe hissed, this time in full rage. “I will fucking murder her in cold blood.” This time she hit the wall, marking it with a few small cracks and close to breaking her wrist. The newly renovated hallway got its mark. Victoria would be next.

“Calm down your horse, you paladin in shining armor.” Steph put a hand on her shoulder, trying not to stain her with apple juice. “Talk to your girlfriend first and let’s check what Victoria has on her.”

It was good advice, as always. The wall devastation woke up Max, they heard a muffled cough and whistles of the sheets. Steph straightened up, alert and ready to jump back, take care and provide, but
the room went silent again, with amazing similarity to Kate’s. Max probably got back to her well-deserved sleep.

“I will talk to Rachel, thank you.” Chloe snorted, still considering a violent murder. “Speaking of girlfriends… did you talk to Max about Kate?”

“Kinda.” Her friend ducked her head, looking reluctant. “Max asked about her a few times, but you saw her, she’s still weak and sick as hell, so… Hmm...” She moved uncomfortably, not used to hiding the truth from anybody. “Let me put it this way... I didn’t share my worries. If I told her about Kate getting into hermit mode, she would be camping out in front of this door day and night and I won’t allow it, not now anyway.”

Sick girlfriends were always a pain in the ass, trying to avoid good care and having the weirdest ideas especially when they should just rest, sleep and look cute. Chloe had decent experience in that field including a few visits to a hospital. Rachel was always more than energetic and even sultry in her responses, especially when not feeling too well, but when on meds, she became adorable and dorky, still too stubborn to lay in place. Chloe had to smile, recalling all those times, when she had to take care of her blond treasure. Even if worrying, those moments always felt special.

“It’s better this way.” She nodded, knowing that Max didn’t have energy for any kind of action, especially for any honorably lost battles. “If Kate won’t show up in class tomorrow, let me know. We can always break in or something. It’s probably just a hangover, right?”

“Probably.” Today was a day when they kept repeating lies just to make themselves feel better. “More moral hangover than alcohol poisoning though. I doubt she ever had a drink before, maybe she is embarrassed or something. Jefferson helped her get out. I don’t trust Nathan, but he wouldn’t do anything stupid around the teacher.”

Chloe nodded yet again, rocking on her heels slowly. It sounded reasonable, rational and wise, but they both felt that something more sinister had happened last Friday. This ugly, sneaky feeling was paralysis, strangling and making all their efforts seem ridiculous. They both wanted to take an action, make a move, do something to make this situation better, but every single idea went to nothing. It was better to accept a convenient lie. For now.

“Keep me updated then. And tell Max I said hi. I don’t want to wake her up.” Chloe shrugged, looking around if everything is in order, then opened the door to Steph’s room to see Max before leaving. The girl was still sleeping, looking more peaceful and relaxed than two days before. The meds were helping, the food would help even more.

“I will, thanks. And thank Rachel for the breakfast, she’s truly an angel. And… Chloe?” Steph stopped her for a second, just before she was ready to pull off. “Don’t kill anybody on your way home, please.”

The blue smile appeared on the lips of her friend when she just nodded slowly, painfully trying to stay calm and not raise hell. Her tired eyes glimpsed with sorrow, not only because she was worrying about Victoria’s secret intrigue, but because of the overwhelming helplessness.

“I will try.” She assured Steph, knowing that it was the only truth regarding her actions, not intentions.

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The parking lot was empty, so no one really cared that she had taken two spots with her truck, including a handicapped one. Chloe walked to the beaten car, opened the door with a loud squeak, throwing the bags and books inside and looking at her reflection in the side mirror. The glass was broken and scattered, but she never really used those elements while driving. Now trying to find herself between the cracks of the mirror, Chloe promised herself to find some time and fix this damn thing. This morning the blue mess was visible and more intense through the broken pieces. A sharp spike of hair, a red eye begging for more sleep, a wry smirk, a few piercings in her ear. She smiled slowly, imagining the whole image, taking scraps and bits together and deciding she didn’t look that bad today. Good, especially regarding the plans for the rest of the day, that would include less clothes and not much sleep.

“Chloe?” A shy voice forced her to turn around. She blushed immediately, thinking how embarrassing it had to look, when she was checking herself out in a car mirror.

“Hi Kelly, what’s up?” She greeted the girl, adjusting her beanie nervously and trying to look as nonchalant as possible. They knew each other for almost a month now. Kelly was part of the group, that Rachel called the pirate fan club, and followed Chloe as often as decency was letting her. Now, for the first time ever, they met without anybody else around.

“Hi…” Kelly tucked her blond hair behind her ear, lowering her gaze. It looked cute and sweet, and damn familiar. Chloe bit her lip, reciprocating the shyness. “I... wanted to give you something... I hope... it’s ok.” The girl handled her an envelope. A fucking pink envelope with Chloe’s name on it. It was a beautiful handwriting, almost a piece of art, created with care and tenderness.

The blue introversion didn’t even have to read the letter to guess what it contained. She wanted to crack a joke, to say something silly about receiving free stuff on a Sunday morning, but she just swallowed hard, cleared her throat and took the envelope. The paper whistled lightly between her fingers, when the leaves of the trees nearby repeated the sound moving in the wind.

It was getting weirder. Kelly was still standing there, waiting or paralyzed by her own courage. Chloe didn’t know what was expected of her, blinded by the sharp sunlight and her own discomfort. Her instinct was screaming to just jump in the car and get back home breaking every speed limit, ignoring the difficult moment, brushing off the awkward feeling, yet it would be unbelievably rude and unfair. Chloe always wanted to play fair.

She had to say something.

“It’s ok, sure. Thanks.” She murmured after a long moment of silence, too long to explain or ignore. “I have to go home though, so... see you tonight at the beach party, alright?”

Kelly nodded, but she didn’t seem excited about another Blackwell meetup. Neither was Chloe, but some social events were obligatory and she had more than one reason to be there tonight. Anyway, it was better to run away now, before she would say something extremely stupid. She waved awkwardly, which would have to suffice as a goodbye, and turned to her truck.

“Drive safe, Chloe.” She heard, closing the car door behind her and turning on the engine. “See you.”
Rachel loved her time alone, served in decent doses and not very often, but it was so nice to sit by the table all by herself, free from the family chatter, and just focus on a simple, fat-free breakfast and a book. Joyce had to work today, David was spending his time in a gun range, Chloe went for a mission to deliver an emergency kit to Blackwell’s flu victim, and she had all the time in the world to dive into Shakespeare’s play. The letters on the old, yellow pages didn’t want to listen though, jumping around and not building up into any reasonable words, as always when she got carried away by her dreams, worries and thoughts, more profound than the written story.

She failed. She failed herself, her expectations, her hopes, her girlfriend. Even if the blame wasn’t hers, Rachel felt damn fucking guilty. Invaded, humiliated, penetrated by the helplessness and high bar of expectations that she had raised herself. Chloe offered her nothing but support and understanding, but she could see an awkward move, a weird gaze, a difficulty in the blue eyes. She could hear a question never asked, between the kisses and the warm embraces. The beg not to start again, not to put both of them through hell one more time, not to detach herself from the world, not to become a different person, a monster really. This request was never spoken, but Rachel could feel it, when fighting her hangover the whole previous day. Once an addict always an addict, imprinted in her DNA, imprinted in her past she still tried to hide. It was so easy to get back to the routine, to another shot, living from high to high. Chloe would never say anything though, always protecting, always comforting, but the whole incident made her anxious. And scared.

Was it weird to feel guilty for something that was forced on you?

One day she would have to face the truth. One day she would have to speak to Chloe, tell her the most humiliating secret, tell her why everything had gone so wrong years ago, why she rejected her for months, why she forgot how to be herself. One day. Never.

Rachel Amber was a fucking coward after all.

She lowered her head, sighing deeply. Rachel knew it would pass, this whole ugly, horrible, piercing feeling in her gut would go away, leaving a trace of an itching, throbbing pain. She would forget and move on, with passion and urge, hoping for the trauma to die in the corner of her memory, relying on a girl who she loved so much but still didn’t deserve. Rachel was a good actress and knew how to hide her fears, how to seduce and how to burn every moment slowly. She knew how to make Chloe madly obsessed with her every single day, but sometimes she was afraid that her arsenal of all the sweet tricks would reach its end. Her girlfriend had seen her in her worst times, helpless and begging, still loved her, but the fear of being abandoned was still there, growing back in a sad bright sunlight.

Focusing on those damn letters was a better idea. Focusing was the key to forget.

Rachel heard Chloe before she saw her. First the tires screeched on the front yard, the old engine chugged when stopped, then a jump and a slam of the car door, always double, just to make sure the truck wouldn’t haunt the neighbors with its inside. Then the main door got closed with a loud bang and fast, firm steps of the cowboy boots drummed on the carpet. Rachel smiled, bit her lip and shook her head, trying to hide her excitement. She still felt like this young tenth grader waiting for her girlfriend for the first time.

It took Chloe just a second to burst into the living room and finally their gazes met.

The blue pirate smiled wildly, but instead of walking fast to the table and get her well-deserved morning kiss, her moves slowed down, got tenser and her eyes narrowed. Rachel could feel her heart beating faster just because of this one promising look. Damn, she missed her, those few hours were
more than enough to go crazy for her again. She hid her eyes behind the book and tried very hard not to bite her lip. Her girlfriend was certainly up not to good.

Good.

“Hello beautiful. Are you here alone?” Chloe pushed Rachel’s chair lightly, leaning against the table and being one move away from straddling her. They were looking at each other in a way that could burn down the whole house, but both tried to act careless and pretend that it wouldn’t lead anywhere except a dirty talk. They both knew it wasn’t true, but this game was invented way before the first serious kiss was shared between them.

And then Chloe stole her toast and started eating it. Rachel rolled her eyes.

“I was with my two toasts. Now I have only one and a thief.”

“Good exchange.” Chloe’s voice was lower, more husky and full of tension, but her seducing effort got mixed up with a bite of bread she tried to chew. Rachel had to giggle. She passed her the cup of coffee that got cold an hour ago. Her girlfriend took a sip readily and winced noticing it was black and no sugar.

“How was your morning trip?” Rachel leaned back in her chair, cocking her head to the side slowly, almost ready to force a welcome kiss. It would require getting up and she really liked her view right now.

“Good.” Chloe’s sight lost the previous intensity but she didn’t move an inch still blocking Rachel from standing up, even if the toast was her main point of interest. “Max is feeling way better, but she was asleep. I left the breakfast as you asked, Steph already ate all the fruits.”

“What about Kate?” Rachel asked, stopping herself from touching the thigh in the blue, worn jeans. It was a bad time for being flirtatious, since the most important and serious issue was about to be discussed. A particularly hard task, while this blue devil was almost sitting on her lap.

“Nothing new.” Chloe shrugged, but avoided the questioning gaze. “She’s still bunkered in her room and not talking to anybody. Steph thinks Kate went too far with her partying shit and that’s it. I believe her.”

Guilt was a weird and interesting feeling. It could be light as a feather, almost invisible, nipping your ear and temple, it could be overwhelming like storm wind in a calm sunny morning. It could appear exactly when you feel hopeful and loved, trashing every single glimpse of joy, distracting and tormenting, and then vanishing again into the abys of total oblivion. An ocean wave, you first barely notice touching you with a pleasant caress, and then splashing from top to bottom, leaving one shaken and drenched. Shocked.

Rachel was in the middle of this freaking ocean now.

“Maybe I should talk to her.” She whispered, regretting she didn’t know the girl better. She never wanted to in the first place, but regret was usually guilt’s favorite prom date.

Chloe noticed the change in her voice immediately.

“Don’t blame yourself over it.” She stroked her cheek, spreading some breadcrumbs on the t-shirt. “Don’t, please. Maybe she just got a little bit too crazy and now she’s fucking praying it out of her soul or something. We will see tomorrow, ok?” A quick kiss helped, but then Chloe got back to the toast and winked. “Anyway, I have to ask you for advice. I think I should. Since honesty, remember?”
“Honesty is my favorite athletic lately. Shoot.”

“Head cheerleader in her prime.” Yet another wink, and she rubbed her neck, discomfited and blushing a little bit. “I might have a small problem and I need you to help me. I believe you would come to me if it would happen to you too.” Chloe touched the back pocket of her pants unconsciously, still feeling the pink paper of an envelope.

Rachel raised one of her eyebrows and closed the book, giving her girlfriend her full attention. “What’s up, Chloe? You can’t find the new bottles of the shampoo? They are in the garage as always.”

“No, it’s not about shampoo!” The blue nervousness grunted, even more embarrassed, and put back the leftovers of the toast back on the plate. It was more than concerning, since she was always famous for finishing her food to the last bit. “It’s about one of those kids that follow me around.”


Chloe scratched her cheek, then her arm, then moved her hips a little bit, trying to change position. The table creaked and rocked, trembling the plates and the mugs. Rachel put her hand on her girlfriend’s thigh, stroking lightly, still waiting. Now she was more than curious.

“You will laugh.” Chloe said finally, almost ready to break off the conversation, run away or start the more pleasant part of the morning.

“I’m laughing already. Look at me.” The blonde cracked a seducing smirk. Her fingers traveled higher up the blue jeans, more provoking than comforting. Very provoking. Chloe gasped, the table cracked.

“Stop, or I will take you on this table here.”

“Later.” Rachel’s palm retreated to the knee instead. She really wanted to know, even the furniture adventure seemed interesting as well. The Madsens need another table anyway. “So?”

Chloe took a deep breath, exhaled, inhaled, exhaled again, and finally said. “I got a love letter. A love-note. A concern of interest. Whatever. I guess. I don’t know what the fuck it’s called.”

Rachel’s hand froze in place in a heated touch that was burning Chloe’s knee through her worn pants. She wasn’t jealous, not yet, but she was on the way to get there. “A love letter? From whom?”

“Like I mentioned, one of those kids…” Her girlfriend murmured, feeling as uncomfortable as possible. Honesty was a bitch after all. “I got it today at the parking lot, this kid…”

“Gender?” The hazel eyes flashed dangerously, when she lowered her head. Even if Rachel tried to sound carefree, her acting skills were failing her, stripping to her pure, raw self. The table cracked again, when she grasped her fingers, locking Chloe in place, pushing her softly. The ownership had been questioned or undermined, it required a serious investigation.

Flaws of having a possessive girlfriend.

“Female.” Slight crack of a worn wood.

“Hair color?”

“Blonde.” Louder crack, with yet another awkward shift.
“Eyes?”

“I don’t know... green maybe?” Chloe was regretting starting this conversation, but still hoped for the best. Every single detail was making her situation worse. “Ha... Ha... Hazel?”

Rachel let her free, crossing her arms on her chest, but Chloe knew very well she couldn’t step back. This whole fucking letter wasn’t her idea, she never asked for it, and being frank was important, but damn, she felt guilty. Her girl, on the other hand, was obviously preparing to take over a DA office or planning a long court battle. Her tone was formal, supposedly warm and understanding, but that was just a disguise. Most people would describe it as probably friendly. Rachel didn’t seem friendly right now.

“Now it escalated into very interesting.” She stated matter-of-factly. “Any special marks?”

“A tattoo?” Chloe rolled her eyes and grabbed the second toast, to cover her blush. She failed badly, both taking a bite and covering her reddish cheeks. If she thought that she could focus on chewing again, she was more than mistaken. “Oh, for fuck’s sake! A fucking lizard on the fucking wrist, alright. I notice things, I learned from the best. What else do you want? Height, weight, shoe size? Rach, do you work for the FBI or something?”

“The DA’s daughter here.” Rachel never looked more similar to James Amber as right now. The same bold gaze, the way she lifted her chin, the piercing eyes and the quiet admonition in every single move. “What was this letter about?”

“Well... Should I show you?” Her girlfriend opened her arms desperately trying to solve the issue, instead of escalating it. The toast looked like a little bread airplane, being waved from side to side. The envelope was still burning her pants’ back pocket. The thought of passing Rachel the letter was still uncomfortable though, like one step too much. Being open is one thing, sharing someone’s secret, even if a ridiculous one, was another. Chloe liked to play fair, even if she was being threatened by Rachel Amber.

It wasn’t very fucking threatening though. The worst thing that could happen was the pleasant part of the day being rougher than usual. She wouldn’t mind.

“It’s your private correspondence, I can’t ask for that.” They both knew it was too much to request, despite of curiosity. “I’m interested in the content only.”

Chloe looked at the toast, noticing that Rachel hadn’t even put butter on it. It was just a sad, dry piece of bread, crunchy and dry already, cold. Her girlfriend didn’t have much appetite today, and comfort food wasn’t her preference anyway.

“Undying love I guess and wishes of me being single and available on the market. No pressure, no weird shit, just writing about some kind of feelings. They call it a crush, or something.”

Rachel relaxed almost immediately. “Ah, one of those.” She smirked, seeing Chloe stealing another sip of the coffee. “I’m sure you got something like that before.” Then, seeing the blue concern, she opened her eyes widely. “You didn’t? Oh my God, you didn’t!”

It was unbelievable, relieving and unacceptable at the same time. No one had ever sent Chloe a cute letter expressing their feelings. No one really put that on paper, showing their admiration. It was a good thing, since Rachel was really prepared to fight to death with every single one of those fanatics, but a sad conclusion too. Chloe deserved a praise, even if her girl would need to spill blood over it.

“Well...” The blue confusion hated this bitter coffee. “Not like in an envelope and on pink paper with
hearts, no. I got some notes here and there though... anyway. She knows I have a girlfriend. She
knows it’s you. She knows I’m not gonna cheat.”

“She better.” Rachel being so dead serious about to combat some poor freshman was making
Chloe’s chest tighten, filled with tenderness and wonder.

“It makes me hella uncomfortable.” She admitted, glad the worst part of the confession was behind
them. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do and stuff. Rachel, I’m being serious.”

“Good.” The hand on her thigh was back. “I like when you are serious. Now let me be jealous.”
Rachel stopped for a second, starring at the ceiling. “All right. Done. Oh wait, not done.” She started
a little bit more, when her fingers started to stroke Chloe’s leg again. “Now done. Kinda. You can
keep the letter in a special stash or even start a freaking album with those that will come later or burn
it down. It’s up to you. And if it comes to the girl, be nice, but not too nice and just try to distance
yourself in a polite way.” The spark of jealously was still there, but used more as a decoration than a
serious danger. Chloe would never admit it but she loved her girl being possessive.

“That’s not really helpful.” She stated unsurely.

“You can’t do anything else.” Rachel shrugged, still trying to be civil and switching to an advisor
mode instead of just being her girlfriend. Chloe really needed this guidance. “You want to tell her
you won’t be available anytime soon? She won’t believe you, or will even get angry, or depressed.
You want to tell her to get the fuck out? Even worse, it’s the same school, you will meet her every
day one way or another. That would make you feel like shit. I know it’s wrenching for both sides,
but if you don’t want to have another girlfriend, and I truly believe you don’t, you just have to act
neutral and forget about it.”

“What if she asks?” Chloe was almost done with the coffee, when she remembered about the cold
toast, still in her hand. Rachel wasn’t in a breakfast mood anyway, she didn’t even comment wryly
about her food being stolen piece by piece.

“Then you will tell her you are really flattered but you are not interested.” Rachel threw the book on
the table, since reading time was definitely over. It was hard to keep it on her lap anyway since her
hands had a better task to do. “Try not to act too concerned or worried, because she might pick it up
and build up some hope. You have to be subtle, baby, it’s not easy. Crushing people’s hopes is
sometimes more draining than making a move on them. She will lose her interest sooner or later
though.”

“Means?” Chloe finished the coffee with one long sip and put the mug back. Her confusion and
perplexity softened her gaze and even if she was listening to Rachel closely, she couldn’t help but
wonder how her girlfriend knew about all this. Rachel was always popular, got a lot of attention, but
Chloe couldn’t remember any particular one, anybody who would follow her as much as she was
followed now. The fact that she wasn’t part of the Blackwell crowd when it probably had happened
made her nervous and… Yeah, let’s face it, jealous.

“A month, a year, ten years. I don’t know.” Rachel shrugged again. “Depends on the person and the
circumstances. Sometimes it never passes, sometimes you are lucky enough and can get the girl at the
end. I’m a living example…”

“Living example?” Chloe frowned. “How long have you been crushing on me?”

“My training in honesty got extended today, I see.” Rachel decided to stare at the ceiling once again,
blushing lightly. “Well, we moved to Arcadia in August 2009, I got obsessed with you within the
first month, so September... We started dating…” Chloe giggled, punished by a light slap in the leg.
“Stop laughing! We started dating like in May of the next year. So yeah, nine months. Probably something around nine months, two weeks and three days, but who’s counting. Patience pays off.”

All those days when Chloe felt stupid, remembering about every single anniversary and not sure if Rachel was paying attention, just hit her with the sudden realization. Her girl was literally marking every single day of her unreciprocated crush in her calendar. She counted the weeks and hoped for a chance, for a small talk, for a small kiss maybe, and damn she got everything. Everything they both wanted.

Chloe really craved to steal a kiss and the only way to do it properly was to sit on Rachel’s lap. She slipped down fast, trying to just reach her lips for a moment, and come back to the previous position, but her girlfriend kept her in place instead, locking and sealing with her arms. It was nice to switch roles though. Rachel felt proud somehow of owning her, of being hers, feeling her weight on her thighs. Not just content, but proud.

The kiss was damn sweet. It tasted like bitter coffee and a peanut butter.

“Damn, you are persistent.” Chloe started to play with the blonde hair, astonishingly shy now. They both were. “I would never have thought you would be that patient.”

They rarely let themselves to go back to the times when they had been still apart, not knowing each other, being just high school strangers. One of them had been consumed by grief and depression, the other by loneliness and horror at home. Recalling even the small and joyful bits and pieces was usually hurtful for both of them, especially since it directly led to the dark corner of forgotten horrors that had happened next.

“I was hopelessly in love, you dork.” Rachel really liked the fact that she had her girl so close. She couldn’t remember why Chloe didn’t sit on her lap more often, except for the obvious reasons like the height and weight difference. Fuck differences. “Not to mention you were dating boys...” She added, bringing one more uncomfortable subject to the table.

Speaking of furniture, the table creaked again, when Chloe tried to support herself more, sparing her girl some trouble, but was stopped very firmly.

“Not dating, hooking up, and not boys, but a creep who later broke into your house.” She laughed shortly, knowing how much Eliot was bothering Rachel from the very beginning. “So, it doesn’t really count as a man of anybody’s dreams. He totally destroyed the rest of my straightness.”

“It’s called heterosexuality.”

“Reading Shakespeare really helps with your vocabulary.” The blue smirk appeared, when she shifted, trying to get up, but was still held tightly. Chloe wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon, even if she knew she was too heavy for that play. “Anyway, I was crushing on you too.”

“That’s new. You never told me.” It was amazing how many secrets they were still able to find in the tight ties between them. Most of the time Rachel felt like she knew everything about her girl and read her like an open book, being the one who had something to hide, but she got surprised almost every single day. She wasn’t sure if asking for more details would be fitting, always blunt to interrogate with a playful smile, but this time it felt wrong. Chloe didn’t need encouragement though.

“There was no reason to tell.” She said softly, playing with Rachel’s earing, still a little withdrawn. “You were hot, but out of my league and always surrounded by annoying assholes. I liked the way you smiled and tilted your head slightly at the same time. It always got me. But I assumed you weren’t into girls, weren’t into me and moved on. Or didn’t move on. Depends on how you look at
“Out of your league?” Now it was Rachel’s turn to laugh. “Are you fucking nuts? Do you have a mirror in this house?”

“Oh, I do.” Chloe’s voice got husky again. “I like to do dirty things in front of it, with the sweet company of my girlfriend.”

Rachel ignored the sultry joke, even if she planned to take advantage of it later.

“Sometimes you have to look at it without your girlfriend around, or on you, so maybe you will understand.” She mirrored the moves just described, smirking and cocking her head, still keeping Chloe on her lap. Yeah, it was really getting her. She could feel an envelope in Chloe’s back pocket, she knew what it was. Pocking the letter through the harsh texture helped to get back to the business. “Anyway, speaking of this lovey-dovey thing, I’ve been on both sides actually. It’s not fun.”

“Both sides?” Chloe was literally the only person who could touch this earring, the famous personal mark, the symbol of a free bird. She was the only one who could ask the bird not to fly away. Even if touching the feather, playing with it lightly wasn’t technically a caress, for Rachel it was the most intimate gesture.

“Yeah, I got some and I gave one.” The earring stopped moving. Rachel rolled her eyes. “Oh please, don’t be jealous now. I’m talking about you, baby. I gave you a note too. It was fucking stressful. Don’t you dare laugh...”

“I’m not laughing.” Chloe decided to stand up, despite her girlfriend’s effort and her arms left empty. “And you didn’t. I never got one.”

She broke the tender moment, walking to the kitchen, checking if there is more coffee, especially more sugar and milk, then murmured a few profanities noticing the pot was unfilled. The slammed doors of the cabinets were creating a fake movement, false sense that everything was all right. Rachel sighed deeply, knowing that her girl just accused her of lying and creating made-up stories. Hurtful, but she probably deserved to face a similar suspicion after years of half-truths. She got up, came to her, closed her in her arms again, like a free bird caging another one of its kind.

“You didn’t get one because I secretly slipped it into your literature textbook somewhere around some love poem examples, you dork.” She said after a gentle kiss. “I wanted to be suggestive for fuck’s sake. I was a chicken shit and I didn’t do it in person though, so your crush is braver than me. However, my amazing precious Chloe Price had never opened this book, because she doesn’t give a shit about poetry in general and just gracefully trashed it while moving out of Blackwell.”

Chloe looked at her in bewilderment for a moment. “I want to check this trash can so badly right now.” She stated, ready to get back to Blackwell even now and try to search every single garbage pile, hoping for a lucky find. It might still be there, crumbled and forgotten, still existing between the lockers, or in a corner of one of the classrooms.

“It got recycled 4 years ago.” Rachel crushed her hopes and decided to make her the damn coffee. She preferred to be busy while talking about her innocent times and the crush that evolved into the love of her life. “Or somebody else got it. Who knows.”

The mugs clanged, coffee marker puffed twice. The smell of freshly grinded beans filled the air straightaway, creating a warm, kindhearted atmosphere. Chloe leaned against the door frame like she had done many times, mostly during serious talks with Joyce. Seeing Rachel in the kitchen, mirroring her mother’s moves was distracting and beautiful at the same time.
“What was in that note?” She asked finally.

“It was a private correspondence. I shall not share it.” Rachel wiped her completely clean hands in the kitchen towel and escaped to the living room, finding a safe shelter by the table. The blue curiosity followed her step by step, demanding an answer with every move. “Chloe, I might not actually remember...” Rachel lied. Damn, she really lied. Damn, Chloe knew she lied.

“You remember everything, part of your charm and my misery. What was it?” Her girl was pitiless, then giggled loudly. “Rachel Amber, you are blushing!”

Her girlfriend, embarrassed beyond repair, was wondering very absorbedly why she had ever recalled this one stupid thing and decided to share this detail. It shouldn’t be excruciating after all those years, but it reminded her of the knot in her stomach, of the excitement and fear of Chloe’s reaction when she, as an innocent kid, was writing this note, pouring her whole soul and heart into every letter, hoping for any kind of contact and a feedback, even a harsh one.

“I was fifteen for fuck’s sake.” She mumbled, playing with the pages of the Shakespeare’s play, abandoned between the plates. Chloe stopped her hand, more amused than persistent. The table rocked a little.

“You are not fifteen anymore and I’m no longer just your crush. What did you write?”

“That I really like you…” Rachel was angry at herself in the most soft and fragile way. She was so angry at the broken promise that she would never tell anybody of this embarrassment. “That I... I really love your smile and being a badass and stuff, and I really want to ask you out. Just you and me. Or something like that. On a pink paper with some hearts and shit.”

“Really?” Chloe blinked.

Still embarrassed, still angry, still a little bit jealous and frustrated at Chloe’s response, Rachel growled and raised her hands in helpless annoyance. Her girlfriend was grinning like an idiot which was both maddening and cute, damn adorable to be exact, so there was only one solution to solve this convoluted issue. Rachel pushed her against the old, squeaky table and kissed passionately. She wanted to do it since her girl came back home anyway, and oh damn, what a kiss it was.

“I was shy. I didn’t know what to do.” She whispered finally.

“Shy you say. That was shy?” Chloe blinked again, surprised by this reaction. She shouldn’t be. Switching moods, reflecting the state of mind was the ultimate solution for her girlfriend to cope with unsettling moments. They just touched her innocent side, so she wanted to show the other one instead. Usual. Typical. Damn fucking hot.

“I’m not fifteen anymore.” She kissed her again so hard, that Chloe almost slipped out of the table. Rachel dragged her closer, being particularly clear about what she expected and what she wanted, and if the intentions weren’t obvious enough she unbuckled Chloe’s belt with one single move. A possessive move. Years of studying Price’s clothing conditions paid off. “…Bed?” She whispered, being turned on to the point that it was hard to hear a word between her panting.

“Bed is boring. Here.” Chloe shifted her head pointing to the open space of the living room and not specifying any precise furniture. The couch would be an obvious choice, but the possibilities were endless. The main lair of the house had also one more, tempting advantage. “You said you like mirrors.” She added, challenging her boldly.

The challenge got accepted. The fucking table creaked with warning or a small beg.
Rachel didn’t listen, still fueled by sparks of jealousy and a tad of frustration. It wasn’t a playful teasing like the night before, or pure unbridled seduction the previous afternoon. It was raw, harsh, intense, obsessive in the worst and best possible way. The jacket, t-shirt and bra were almost ripped off, probably damaged, probably torn in a few places with all this rush. The empty mug fell off on the carpet, the plates ringed in a hasty song. She didn’t stop kissing Chloe, pulling her close with such force as if it had been months since they did it, not just hours. Not the table, not the table, damn, not the fucking table. Chloe knew her mother would kill her if she would find her favorite sitting shredded to splinters, and it seemed that Rachel didn’t care if the whole house would fall on them right now. She moaned between the kisses, then yet again, louder, showing there was nothing to stop her. It was getting tougher, but somehow Rachel read her mind, and pulled her closer just to save the freaking piece of furniture.

The table thanked them with a small sigh of wooden relief.

The small blonde girl could be very strong when she wanted, and now she was nothing else but want. She pushed Chloe through the whole room, landing her against the couch, unzipped her pants and reached inside. It was severe, fast and firm, to show who was in charge, who was in command, no innocence involved. It wasn’t unwanted, on the contrary. Chloe felt her hair pulled, in a punitive, but not unpleasant way and she was forced to look into Rachel’s eyes, burning and melting the hazel down. She didn’t have a choice, she didn’t want to have a choice.

“Kiss me.” She whispered, watching, being forced to watch.

“No.” Rachel shook her head frantically, and then looked at them in a mirror. “Not yet.”

She liked to watch them doing it, multiplying the want in the reflection. The old-fashioned tall mirror had seen a lot, but kept all the secrets to itself. A safe exposure.

It was getting harsher, but even on this moment of pure raw passion Rachel had to stop a few times, play with the need and time, just to start again harder, firmer, wilder. Demanding a certain moan or another cry close to scream, she kept holding Chloe an inch from a kiss, miraculously forcing her girl to stand still. The kiss was a bait, it was a bait of course, otherwise Chloe would fall to her knees a long time ago. Their lips kept feeding on the panting, quick breaths, the whole fucking need to meet. Not yet though.

Chloe had no idea how her legs were still carrying her, even if she was leaning against the couch. Her body jerked once, twice, she was very close to rip herself apart for this one fucking scream, dying there, dying so fucking hard, but Rachel was strong keeping her in place, putting her in place to be exact, directing and demanding, ordering. She was so close to the damn stars herself by only looking at her blue mess, blue desire, in reality and in reflection. She loved the reflection, the love in reverse. Unforgiving yearning, raw passion, but still love, love in the first place. Care. Command. One word and she would stop though. No one wanted to stop.

They both liked it hard.

Chloe wanted to hold her, drag her closer, to feel more connected, but her effort was rejected steadfastly. No touching, except the one Rachel ordered and provided with fierce force. “Mine.” she moaned into her lips, confirming her title once again. “Mine.” She did it again, and that whisper almost cost her girl her own blue mind.

“Yours.” Chloe confirmed in a husky voice, and then just a second of eternity later, she came, then the kiss came, exactly in the same moment, hard, harder, stop, one more time, then slowing down as her heartbeat was reducing, the pulse retreating, and the one became two again. No one demanded anything anymore, no order, no dominion. Chloe was held close, closer, comforted, loved, taken care
“Yours…” She repeated drowning in Rachel’s arms, when her girl was caressing her naked shoulders controlling her own heated breath. Chloe really wanted to return every single favor, take her now, reverse the roles, mirror the moves, hear her coming, feel her body tensing. She really needed it, but was completely deprived of any possibility of movement. For now.

Rachel didn’t mind, even if still turned on, aroused beyond words, but she could wait. She wanted to wait. Holding her girl, her blue treasure, her whole world was way more important than any fucking pleasure, even her own. This thought scared her for a moment, how selfish she could become, how obsessed she was, but then she felt a kiss on her neck and a gentle invitation to lay on the damn couch since they both were barely standing. Rachel found enough strength to make them comfortable, still fronting the damn mirror. She felt a known gesture, a finger under her own shirt, an invitation and a shy request, so she agreed still speechless and took it off to feel her girl closer, skin to skin, even if there was no reason to be half naked.

“That was… unexpected.” Chloe sighed finally, still in her arms, lying on her chest slowly getting her voice and her own self back. It always felt like a slow reborn, a discovery that the world outside existed somehow and didn’t die in flames by accident. They both were pretty good with burning things down.

“It was more than expected.” Rachel was holding her closely, filled with her smell, and still staring at the mirror and smiling with pure joy. There was a touch of a triumph in her smirk too, but she couldn’t help being a satisfied conqueror. “I couldn’t take my eyes off you today.”

“Why is that?” This question had to be asked, it was always asked, because her beautiful, amazing, incredible girlfriend was damn fucking clueless.

This time Rachel Amber decided to respond and trash the whole cluelessness, the whole insecurity that was always cherished but Chloe had to know, she had to understand why. Finally. Sigh.

“Look at yourself, Chloe.” She pointed at the old-fashioned mirror, always in use before every single big event or a party to feed their need for vanity and assertions. This event was way greater. “Look when you lay in my arms.” The romantic moment was almost broken in half because the blue pirate preferred to stare at her eyes instead. Rachel had to order her once again. Gently this time. “Stop moving for fuck’s sake, just look at yourself. I fell in love because of those beautiful blue eyes. Those eyes you see right there.” She pointed at the reflection. “When I was just a new kid in school and our eyes met for the very first time, I was struck for a good ten minutes. I couldn’t even move. I was just looking at this girl, who was ignoring me all the way and I didn’t know what to do with myself.” Rachel kissed her neck, not letting her turn away or to stop watching the mirror. “I saw your soul then, I remember that so well. I wasn’t mistaken. You were always playing tough but I could see how vulnerable you really were, how broken, how much you wanted to be loved. I wanted to make you happy since then and even I fucked up a lot of times, I’ve never stopped trying. When you are happy I can see freaking stars in your eyes, a whole milky way living and breathing, damn you, and sometimes… I’m the one who causes this.” She added shyly.

“You are.” Chloe’s whisper was soft, almost enhanced. She watched them both too, caressing Rachel’s hand not believing her ears. And eyes. Like they say, it was magical. Mirrors do that to people.

“Shut up and don’t distract me.” Just a small nip in the neck made Chloe giggle. Rachel loved hearing this laugh, but there was a more important thing to do. To track down every piece, to show every bit, to put this thing together, to show for once, finally. “The eyebrows that make weird moves every time I say something… unexpected. The lips than can give the best kisses and the best smiles.
That blue hair you dyed for me, for us, to be related, to be mine.” Her voice broke, when she remembered the circumstances when it had happened. Chloe wanted to stop her, give her solace, but was put in place yet again. Sometimes it was so hard to hold this blue bird in place. “Shut up, I said. This sweet freaking cute nose you crinkle every time I tickle you in the morning or when you can’t light up your cig. The tattoo I remember you got because you really wanted to mark our second anniversary. The arms that can be so strong and so fragile at the same time. Your hands that can do a lot of things.” Their palms met, their fingers tangled. Chloe smirked wittily and got exactly the same grimace in return. “No, I’m not talking dirty, that too, but you are damn talented. Whatever you touch turns to gold, like when you fixed the truck a long time ago having a simple toolbox. You are so beautiful, baby. You have no idea how much. People see this, they see your strength, they see you are a survivor and a protector. They fall for you because you are a fucking miracle. You experienced so much, that marked you so deeply and you’re beaming with freaking beauty all the time. They see your confidence, your determination, your gift. You give people hope. You give me hope. And the best part of it...” Rachel dragged her closer, as close as possible, closing her in her arms and closing her eyes. She didn’t have to look anymore, she knew what she would see. “The absolutely best fucking part of it is that you are mine. And I’m yours, Chloe fucking Price. And it will stay that way, till the day I die.”

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The Blackwell swimming pool got back to its athletic form already, forgetting the traumatic memories of Friday night. All the lights, stage, decorations and posters were taken off, leaving only small, dirty marks here and there like scars of an accident that should never happen in the first place. The pool was already filled and ready to use, but only one person decided to train that early on a Sunday. A person Victoria was trying to contact for over two days.

She watched him swimming round after round, splashing the water furiously in a pathetic and desperate try to cross the waves, run away further, and then return, mirror his own moves, repeat. His style wasn’t impressive, standing on the contrary with his determination to break from his own cage in a limited water trap. He had never been a skilled athlete, buried in his fantasies and art, but it wouldn’t surprise Victoria if he suddenly changed his interests. Nathan was unpredictable and short-tempered, which was fascinating for her and annoying at the same time. She preferred long term strategy and persistent execution. Her friend was changing his mind all the time.

Victoria walked fast along the edge, hoping she wouldn’t wet her shoes. The heels tapped the white tails loudly, splashing the puddles of chlorinated water. She could see her distorted reflection in the glimpse of fake waves and drops of a false sea. It wasn’t a pleasant view, but it wasn’t a perfect mirror.

“Nathan... Nat, stop!” She yelled, chasing him in this awkward race. Water against the ground. Steps against the swim. “Can you listen to me for a moment?”

He finally stopped at the end of the line, panting and shaking from the exertion. She noticed how pale his body was, not showing any signs of tan or effects of sunlight altogether. Nathan looked like he was born and raised in some kind of darkroom, not in Florida, the sunshine state, famous for its beaches and luxurious life. He didn’t look luxurious at all.

“I’m busy right now.” He yelled back, too tired to continue. Nathan apparently didn’t want to talk, but nothing would stop Victoria, especially when irritated and driven to get what she wanted. Not used to being avoided, especially from people who she really admired, she walked to him fast, almost
tripping on the slippery surface.

“You have been busy the whole damn weekend.” She complained in a demanding tone. “Didn’t respond to my texts or calls. What’s up with you?”

“I needed some time off.” He cleared his forehead and eyes from the water, panting, snorting, spilling, not used to that extended activity. “I really needed some time off. Alone. I still need. Some. Time.” Nathan kept repeating like in a trance, rubbing his eyes, cheeks, nose and chin. It almost looked like he came here to shower, to clean himself up and wash all his dirt. His body was shaking lightly, hammered by remorse, guilt or simple coldness. The water was probably freezing though. He might also suffer from a withdrawal, Victoria assumed. She sighed with resignation with a tad of understanding. That was it, he just didn’t take his meds or the emergency supplies ran out.

She crouched by the edge of the pool, with an intention of a comfort talk, but when he noticed how close she moved toward him, he jumped back, almost getting underwater, splattering her badly. Victoria hissed, getting up, almost completely drained. She wanted to yell and scold him, rebuke, but the real fear in his eyes scared her, froze her in place.

It wasn’t just a withdrawal.

“What the hell, Nathan?” She asked feeling the cold tear of sweat running through her spine, even if her shirt was completely drained in the swimming pool water. He was shaking heavily, creating his own small waves, rippling and fluttering the surface in an eerie pace. “What happened?”

Nathan spat, wiping his face again, a step away from drowning. The pool was pretty deep in this place, required some skill to keep on the surface for such a long time. His fingers were trembling grasping on the tailed edge, like it was straw from falling down entirely. He covered his face with his arm, almost cried, sobbed loudly waking up the swimming pool echo. The drops of water mixed with tears, kept his panic attack in disguise.

“What happened to Kate, Nathan?”

“Kate?” He opened his mouth in terror. It was a well-aimed shot. He looked like a little kid caught at night by a half-empty cookie jar. Guilty, scared but somehow adorable in his greatest fear. Victoria always had a sweet spot for him, but she didn’t allow herself to smile. She had to know the details. She strived for details.

“Yes, Kate, the Catholic girl you’ve been following around?” She specified, taking a step forward. “You scored her or she dumped you? That’s what it is about?”

Nathan’s body jerked, like he just woke up from a terrible nightmare. He almost went underwater again, but held on the edge in the last minute. Victoria frowned not sure what she was supposed to think about it. He bowed his head, looking at his distorted reflection in the white tile, and then splashed the water again and again like an angry child, not happy with his evening bath.

“No, no, no. Kate... I don’t know Kate.” He cried. “I can’t know Kate.”

He was scaring her. Victoria was more than used to his whims, but she never experienced that appalling and grisly reaction. Nathan was usually a loner, he never was interested in any girl in
particular, mostly moving from one crush to another, taking advantage of young and gullible women attracted to him mostly because of his wallet or possible opportunities. The only one, who was always resistant to his advances was Rachel fucking Amber, because of obvious reasons, but she wasn’t a part of this issue certainly. So, Kate. It had to be Kate. Was it possible that he was really in love with this stupid nun?

“I found your jacket on the floor in front of her room.” Victoria inclined a little. “I know you’ve been there on Friday night. Just tell me what happened and we will sort it out.”

He was calming down slowly, wiping his face again and again, splashing more water, and clearing his eyes one more time. His moves were frantic, breath uneven. Nathan looked around, desperately trying to find his way out, from the situation, conversation, water in general, the trap of being himself.

“I was just helping... helping her to get...” He panted, looking at the pool ladder, so close and yet so far. He didn’t have enough strength to get there, and the water was really fucking deep.

“To get what, Nathan?”

She pushed too hard. He jumped back, letting go of any support, creating more chlorine waves, choking on water, terrified, really terrified, suffocating on his own panic. Nathan started to disappear under the surface, once, twice, yet again, and the only thing she could do was to watch him drowning. Any constructive strategy, any direct word she had prepared wouldn’t help and she wasn’t up to jumping there, sacrificing everything for her poor, pale friend.

Nathan finally grasped onto the edge again, saving himself from a fatal float.

“She’s fine, alright?” He yelled in desperation. “I didn’t do anything! She is fine! Now leave me the fuck alone!”

Victoria came here for the answers, but she was leaving with more inquiries than she had predicted. She wanted to ask him about the beach party tonight, but knew very well he wouldn’t respond. There was a huge chance he wouldn’t miss such an important social integration and she would be able to press him then a little bit more.

He was hiding something troubling, something way more sinister than illegal pharmaceutics and mental health issues. Something had happened. Victoria didn’t like secrets, especially the ones hidden from her in such a disrespectful manner. She had to get to the bottom of this. Passing the girls’ locker room, she looked in the mirror and hissed. Her only hope was an almost empty campus and not many students around to notice how terrible she looked. Her hair was ruined and the hairdresser might be too busy today to fix it properly. Make-up had to be redone for sure and the clothes would reek for days, it was better just to throw them out.

Maybe she should throw out Nathan’s jacket too? Or, since he wasn’t very responsive, it was better to go through his pockets, learn more about his secrets. Who knew what kind of information she would be able to find.

Victoria almost forgot about her master plan of taking down Rachel Amber. This annoying slut was playing on her nerves, and her thoughts wandered to her twice in the last hour. Not good, but she would mercifully let her and Price to be carefree for a moment. Nathan was more important.

And Kate. She had to ask this girl a few questions.
The first thing she saw, when she opened her eyes was a plate filled with toasts, waffles, omelets and sausages, all sadly cold, and her girlfriend sitting by her desk, buried in her “Dungeons and Dragons” books, scrabbling something firmly, supported by maps, drawings and dice. Max could sense a new campaign coming, probably a long and hard one that would lead her and all of their friends through a new, wild territory and abound with interesting encounters. It was a pleasure to see how passionate Steph was, completely grasped by the fantasy world, filled with magical creatures and characters, and yet so real to her and everybody else involved.

“Steph, can you come here? Please, I need to talk to you.” Max asked and sat in her sheets, discovering with a surprise how good she was feeling. The fever was gone, the annoying pain in her chest disappeared and she could breathe way easier.

“Sure, baby. What’s up? Do you need anything?” Steph literally dropped everything and joined her, checking her forehead and acting more on her habits than actual need. Not reaching for the famous thermometer was a good sign though. Max was stronger, maybe not entirely alright, but the worst, dark times were behind her. Therefore, she decided to ask a question that was bothering her for almost two days.

“Yes, actually I do. I need you to be honest with me. Did you talk to Kate?”

Steph knew it was coming, she could feel it in every fiber of her being. She bowed her head with resignation. That concerned Max more than any verbal response. At least for now.

“No. I tried though.” Her girlfriend started slowly, deliberately, but then dropped the mask of patience more relieved than scared to finally confess. “Alright, don’t kill me, but she doesn’t talk to anybody right now. She got pretty crazy that night, fooling around and got drunk as a skunk. We tried to control the situation, but Rachel got into trouble and Chloe had to take care of her.”

Max felt sick again, sick to her stomach, but it wasn’t the flu, it was the weird awareness that something went way worse than she expected. She peered at the cold breakfast, forgotten and miserable, ironically reminding her of all the dead promises she was given. Rachel was supposed to be safe, Chloe wasn’t supposed to be involved with anything except keeping an eye on her friend.

“What kind of trouble?” She cleared her throat, trying not to react rapidly. Lack of strength was barely an excuse to keep her in place. Patience was a long and bumpy road, she kept learning how to walk this trail every day, previously so eager to act hastily and in hurry.

The situation required endurance.

“Somebody put some stuff into Rachel’s drink, drugs of some kind. Chloe blames Victoria though. It’s fine, nothing happened, really. But we didn’t really follow Kate all the time. I couldn’t, I... I was at work, you know that.” Steph retreated completely, giving up and ready to reveal every single aspect. She was a living definition of honesty anyway and lying to her girl was almost as hard as for Max to take the truth. “Shit, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but I really think it’s just a hangover, or maybe she is ashamed. I don’t know.”

Ashamed. Who wasn’t?

Max was supposedly calm, not moving, not reacting, not even blinking, just analyzing and absorbing the news, comparing with memories and visions. Steph saw her stronger, taller, more determined
than ever before and it took her off guard. She expected a fierce reaction, tons of questions, blame claims, but Max looked withdrawn, detached and strangely unconcerned.

“So, Kate...” She spoke slowly, straining her words in an uncharacteristic way, adding an abnormal pace to the uneven conversation. “How did she come back to her room? Do you know?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly. I was told that Jefferson and Nathan helped her to get out and somebody brought her back.”

“Jefferson and Nathan…” Max took a very deep breath, marked with trepidation. “…took her out of the party?”

Damn, she was calm. She had never been so calm in her life.

“Yeah...” Steph looked at her in disbelief. That was the less troubling part of the story. “Jefferson is a teacher, Max. Even if Nathan the creep had some bad intentions, he would never do anything stupid in front of a professor.”

Her girlfriend didn’t need to listen to anything anymore. She threw away the blanket, jumped off the bed, stopped for a second hit by dizziness, and then walked fast to her closet, ready to dress up. She found her phone buried between Steph’s notes and dragon drawings, checking the text messages, not hoping for much. Only a few texts from her friends and family cheering for her recovery, sending their smiles, flowers, digital cards. Feel better, the phone screamed at her. Feel better. How could she?

“Max?” Steph got up, not sure if she should stop her with words or a gesture, almost kicking the breakfast plate down. “What are you doing? Max!”

She was almost ready though. Putting some clothes on didn’t require a lot of effort, even if she was still vertiginous, and her moves jagged. The first time getting up from bed, feeling the texture of normal clothes, scratching her skin instead of cozying her comfortably was always a wakeup call. She had a problem with tying her shoelaces, giving up with her second shoe. Kate was living just a few steps away, she can be unkempt after all.

Nothing was kempt. Nothing was fine.

The cold sweat was dancing the tango with the waves of heat going through her body. She wasn’t alright yet, but it was a given. Organize, manage, move on. She was on a mission, already fucking lost. She really trusted them, she was promised and now she had to clean up, fix everything as always. Her sickness fit the picture, her state was reflecting the situation so well. The scraps of the fever and a hollow muscle ache were keeping her connected. Guilt was a weird feeling, sometimes it was better to take it when beaten down.

Max peered at the mirror and smiled sadly seeing how pale her face was and how tired her eyes looked like. “I have to talk to her.” She simply stated and walked to the door, almost stumbling on her untied lace.

“She doesn’t talk to anybody!” Steph still tried to cross her path, but when Max wanted to do something, no persuasions would work.

Nothing would stop her. Nothing was fine.

“She will talk to me.”
A passionate morning made an imprint on Chloe, those moments always had a similar impact. Seeing her girlfriend sitting in front of her, about to enjoy freshly a delivered dinner, she couldn’t help but think of how fast Rachel could change, now seeming delicate and fragile. She wasn’t that fragile a few hours back, taking her hard, punitively and with no mercy, forcing to look at the reflection and controlling every single reaction. This force faded away now, the urge was gone and this one small beautiful blonde was adding some extra salt to her fries and watching her salad suspiciously like nothing had happened.

Two Whales was always the perfect place for a romantic dinner, the only diner with decent food too, even if it meant exchanging tender gazes in front of one’s mother. Today the space wasn’t that crowded, since most of the habitants of Arcadia Bay preferred to heat up their microwave dinners at home, keeping up the appearances of family life. The chatter was quieter, less plates and utensils clacked in unison and the clientele was more engaged in selecting the next milk shake’s flavor than to pay attention to them. Chloe liked the afternoons here, she loved the sense of home and safety. Hence it became yet another weekly ritual for her and Rachel.

“Wanna know a secret?” Chloe stroked her hand, not really caring for her two double beef burgers. Those mornings were always making her hungry, but still feeling Rachel’s touch on her skin, sore and pleasantly lazy, she strived for something else. Tenderness. “I tried to write a poem once.”

“You did? About what?” Telling a secret in front of a salad was Rachel's curse. This secret seemed nice though, even if she suspected another joke. Chloe’s sight was so soft and dreamy, that even a few customers got smitten seeing how much in love she was. Rachel knew this mood very well, more than content with herself. That’s how happy Chloe looked. And it was because of her, damn it. The fries could wait.

“How much you mean to me and how much I really like you.” The blue confession smiled without a sign of embarrassment. “I failed miserably. I couldn’t find anything sensible that rhymes with Rachel. Yep, it’s true.” She tapped the surface to point the honesty of her words. “I still have a scribble somewhere. Now you can double blush and shit.”

And the moment was gone, her hand was gone, the burgers started to disappear in record time, bite by bite and in long, fast chews. An adorable retired couple sitting just a few feet away stared at Chloe, impressed at how effective she could be with emptying her plate. Rachel was watching her too, with her mouth half open but because of a completely different reason. A poem? Why hadn’t she heard anything about it before?

“You really… made an effort to write poetry for me?” She stuttered.

“Effort is an excellent word.” Chloe leaned forward on her seat to get the ketchup bottle almost staining her shirt with the beef grease. “I made an effort, not a poem. But yeah, I did. I’m romantic sometimes.”

Rachel should already be used to seeing half of the tomato sauce bottle on her girl’s plate but was always surprised at how much ketchup she would need to consume on one single meal. The blue pirate’s fries were just drowning in red. Rachel slowly started her own dish, still analyzing what she had just heard. Poetry. Chloe. Words. Her Chloe. Putting words together on paper. Her name. Rhymes. Ketchup.
“You are hella romantic, Chloe Price.” Rachel shook her head in bewilderment, cracking a shy smile. “You amaze me every day.”

“Especially with non-existing poems and stupid efforts? It’s getting easier to amaze you.” Chloe swallowed almost half of her burger already, and remembering about the fries, grabbed the salt planning to add more misery to the culinary disaster. One of the customers, a young attractive girl, probably a visitor, not a habitant of Arcadia Bay, paid her bill, got up and was walking to the exit. Rachel’s eyes immediately shifted, checking the stranger out. Chloe noticed of course and choked lightly. Amber and her attraction to girls was the subject never discussed. Maybe it was time to break this silence, especially if they had a reason. “Anyway, I talked to Steph today.”

“Gandalf the gay gave you some advice?” Rachel joined the feast with full force, brushing off the adoring moment. She would be hella romantic tonight, she was sure of it. Poetry Chloe said, poetry Chloe would get. An attractive stranger didn’t really make any imprint in her memory. She was still impressed by Chloe and was Chloe’s only.

“A warning. Victoria fucking Chase is on the hunt again.”

“Her shotgun is too small, she can’t aim shit and her bullets always explode in her face.” Rachel shrugged, not really threaded by another of Chase’s potential intrigues. “I don’t expect her to have a decent prey this time.”

“Why is she always up your ass?” Chloe stopped chewing, watching her girl closely.

“Because it’s Victoria Chase and she hates me more than her own existence? Don’t you dare!” She added, seeing Chloe’s hand sneaking under the table and trying to touch her knee. It would be pretty nice if it wasn’t for the fact that the grease and ketchup were all over her fingers. Chloe retreated yieldingly. The retired couple looked at them with a quiet warning. Rachel apologized with a cocky smile, a little bit too bold to be innocent.

“Yeah, but you are getting upset because of it.” The fact that Chloe couldn’t touch her leg didn’t throw her off guard. “I don’t like my Rachel upset. I like my Rachel happy. You were always persistent and didn’t give a fuck. What happened?”

“Well, I don’t know, maybe you softened me up.” Rachel was desperately trying to use her fork at least for half of the food she was putting into her mouth, but switching between utensils and her hands was more than annoying and felt useless, especially looking at Chloe, who was pretty close to eat her own plate and never cared for any kind of savior-vivre, except some rare, special occasions. Their ‘family dinner’ definition changed a lot in the past few years.

“I didn’t soften you up. Or maybe I did, but I’m sure Victoria Chase wasn’t present at the time and she will never be. What’s wrong, Rach? Is she up your ass because you’re gay?”

Sunday afternoon just got heavier, filled with beef grease.

Rachel froze in place. Chloe slowed down her chewing watching her girl becoming uneven, imbalanced, uncomfortable. The change was so rapid, that even an extraordinary acting talent wouldn’t help to cover all the jarred moves and panic in her eyes. The famous Shakespearian Blackwell star tried though, she tried very hard, so used to hiding her own distress. Chloe sighed, putting the burger back on the plate, wiped her greasy fingers and reached for her hand again. Rachel ran away with her gaze, but not from the grasp.

“She likes to drag this argument into the discussion, yes.” She said quietly.
“And it hurts you.”

“It…” Rachel sighed and bit her lip still looking everywhere else but at her girlfriend. “It bothers me because she’s getting into my business suggesting proudly that I’m gonna leave you one day or you will leave me because of my supposed straightness.”

The sunlight beaming through the dirty window, reflecting on many fingerprints visible on the glass, was making the scraps of the dust dance. It would be easier for Rachel to count all the bits and pieces than actually face this issue and she still didn’t know why.

“It’s called heterosexuality, Shakespeare told me. And about me and you breaking up… It’s ridiculous even for Victoria. She knows I won’t fucking leave you for a dick and you…” Rachel held her breath, so afraid another sin of the past would be dragged into the discussion. Chloe knew what she was doing though. “You won’t do it either.” She stated firmly. “You are not straight and never have been. I’m sure she is aware of it. You never had a boyfriend, only winking at guys when you felt bad for them, never acted like…”

Rachel stopped her raising her hand. The dropped fork tinkled weakly, hitting the edge of the plate. Eating was out of the question. She wouldn’t be able to swallow a thing anyway. Her throat tightened, while an awkward weakness was capturing her. It was plainly dumb to feel so much, to wake up so many emotions because of a simple fact, a supposed secret, that everybody knew already.

“It’s just… I don’t know. I don’t like to be defined, I guess. Those fucking labels, I hate them. The popular girl, the cheerleader girl, the probably…” Rachel almost choked. “Gay… girl. Like everybody wanted to describe me, add a fucking stamp on a file just to be done. It pisses me off when somebody demands an explanation for why I’m with you or… into... into…”

“Girls?” Chloe stated simply.

Simplicity was everything that Rachel tried to avoid. It couldn’t be that simple, there had to be more to it. People were complex, supremely complex, they couldn’t be labeled with three damn letters. This word was such a trigger, she didn’t want to be triggered, feeling locked down and torn between the possibility of breaking out and hiding herself deeper. She looked around, seeing that the old couple noticed the tension, and the young policeman sitting by the counter also sent them a questioning look. Damn it.

“Girls… Yeah, well… Maybe.” Why was it that hard? Why couldn’t she just be done with it? “I’m into you, as you noticed a few hours ago and will notice more this evening, unless you will go through your science class notes again.”

A sultry pun didn’t impress or distract Chloe, who was still under a short-term resistance after this morning and no sexual innuendos would take any effect. Not when she was in charge slowly digging deeper, bringing some things to light, dosing the pressure carefully but still being dominant and controlling.

The roles were switching surprisingly easy.

“Stop joking shit.” Chloe cut out any possibility to get into a dirty talk instead. “Have you ever thought about other girls?”

“Like since we were together? Now you stop joking.”

This salad was shit. It was better to get back to the fries. They called it comfort food, right?
Chloe decided that her meal was done. This Sunday was filled with unfinished themes, especially when it came to meals and conversations. Why did they always have a serious discussion while eating something? It could be dangerous, somebody could choke and die. She leaned in her seat, cleaning her hands in a napkin, still watching her hella troubled girlfriend. They had been together over three years now, open in public, holding hands and making out in front of the whole town and Rachel still had a problem with saying this word, still giving too many fucks and bothered greatly.

“No. Other girls in general.” She specified, wondering if she didn’t push too hard. “Before me, in between, in some of your dark fantasies. Or the rainbow fantasies to be exact.”

Rachel threw the fry back on her plate, clenching her jaw. Getting angry at her own girlfriend was probably the worst solution, but she didn’t have that many options left.

“Why are we doing this? You sound like Victoria right now. I don’t like it.”

“I’m just asking a question.” Chloe tried to be soft and supporting, but also persisting. It wasn’t really going that well. She tried to start this discussion a long time ago, but something always stopped it half-way. Maybe the boost of confidence served in front of the mirror was the reason why she finally found the courage, maybe it was the stranger Rachel expressed interest in, or maybe it was just a natural turn of events. She tried to fade away the anxiety, stroking her hand slowly, showing her she understood, even if she didn’t. Most of the times Chloe thought she knew everything about Rachel, she had learned how to read her, but this issue was always a mystery.

“Do I think about girls? Do I check them out?” Rachel raised her voice, knowing the answer perfectly well. Too well. A policeman sitting at the counter looked at her with curiosity, the old couple started whispering something in exhilaration. She sniffed quietly. “Does it matter since I’m with you, even fucking engaged? It’s stupid. You are my endgame, who cares?”

Endgame sounded hella nice and was worth a hot damn kiss, but Chloe knew she had a more important task to do. Kisses would come later, eventually.

“You do. It bothers you, so why not openly talk about it? I see you have problem with it and I see you struggle. It’s getting to you. Victoria is playing you as a fucking fiddle and that makes you cry. I can go and kick her ass, I’m planning to do it anyway, but it won’t stop. There will always the next Victoria or the next gay bully in the neighborhood. You can’t give a fuck about it, you gave too many. One day you have to stand in front of a mirror not to fuck me, not to give me the most amazing speech on earth, not to check how hot you look today, but to try to say it aloud. To say it you’re gay and that’s not a fucking problem.”

Rachel was angry. A minute ago. Now she was just sitting here, weakened, almost close to tears. A couple of lost tourists entered the diner, creating a tornado of smiles, arguments and loud inappropriate comments. They had to be lost, no one sane was visiting this forgotten town, especially so late in the fall. Their arrival distracted the older couple and the law officer, but Rachel didn’t even notice them, still locked in the weird state of silence, because of reasons unknown.

Chloe frowned, not sure how to react. She knew this conversation wouldn’t be easy, but didn’t expect to upset her girl. They both knew that gay jokes were flying around almost all the time, especially with Steph and Max present, but Rachel had a serious problem even pronouncing the word in front of anybody else who wasn’t part of their little group. Chloe couldn’t recall how many times her girlfriend actually said it and, and, except a few moments of great agitation, she couldn’t recall any.

It was troubling. For both of them.
“Baby, don’t push it, ok?” Rachel asked softly. “I will deal with it one day.”

Guilt was a weird feeling. It gets you exactly when it shouldn’t and when it was not expected or even wanted. Rachel looked like somebody just cut off her wings, took away the enjoyment. This wasn’t the note Chloe wanted to end this talk with, but it was too much to bare. She pulled Rachel’s hand to her lips and kissed lightly, showing her dedication.

“I’m sorry. I love you, you know that. I don’t want Victoria to get to you. I can’t stand it.”

Rachel nodded, relieved she bought some time, a few moments free of those thoughts and questions. She tried to finish her meal, but it was extremely complicated with Chloe holding her hand. She had to break the grasp and finally enjoy some of Joyce’s specials.

Food helped. It was comforting indeed. They were consuming in silence, mostly Rachel though, since Chloe was already done and waited for a chance to feed on nicotine, drinking her water and watching the salad slowly disappearing.

“If you think that a magic mirror trick will solve it, you are mistaken.” Rachel finally started talking, still paying more attention to the food than Chloe. “It’s not that simple. It’s more complex than… being… gay. Victoria is jealous of what we have, hinting that it won’t last. It gets to me sometimes of course. She thinks we don’t deserve it.”

Everybody had a trigger and Chloe wasn’t free of this flaw. She had battled with her own insecurities for years, so afraid that her love was not enough to keep Rachel freaking Amber to herself. She had gone so far for this relationship to work, sacrificing everything she was asked for and her girlfriend did exactly the same, risking her life and well-being. They made a shitload of mistakes, sure, but their bond was still strong, getting stronger even. Now somebody dared to question it. She threw the fucking napkin on the plate, staining it with the rest of the ketchup. It looked more like murder evidence than a leftover of a meal.

“Rachel fucking Amber, you can’t be serious right now!”

“You asked.” Their eyes met. Chloe was close to being furious, Rachel visibly upset. “If you are not prepared for an honest answer why would you even bother to start a conversation?”

The table, a metal and a solid one, moaned with a slight crack, when Chloe slammed it with full force. “This conversation is over, because there is nothing else to discuss. You deserve everything I can give, and more. Sticky Vicky can suck my dick!”

The policeman by the bar looked at them again, more concerned than before. Chloe sent him a murderous look. The old couple was reading the menu with unexpected attention. The tourists shut up, the whole diner got silent for a very long minute. Rachel apologized to everybody with the sincerest smile she could provide.

“Bossy. I like it.” She winked when everything got back to normal, seeing how eager her blue rebel was to protect her.

Chloe was done and ready to go. She finished her drink, left a few bills on the table and got up. Everything took less than a minute. Then she held out her hand to help Rachel, in a surprisingly courteous manner. It was a romantic dinner after all despite all this being gay convoluted shit.

When her girl stood up on her feet, she got a kiss, more tender than passionate, but no one, including the old couple, the tourists or the representation of the law enforcement would dare to doubt who she belonged to. Chloe really wanted to mark her ownership and it was responded with a fervent
cooperation. Yet another kiss by a table today, it started to become a routine.

“I’m gonna show you bossy later,” Chloe bit her lower lip, humming softly. “… just after the science notes.”

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Everything was a lie, even her own reflection, even her own breath and trembling fingertips. Everything she believed in, thought of, hoped for, was just a pure, deliberate bullshit, a laugh in her face, a humiliating measure of her own incompetence, her own bad judgements.

We all are victims of the mistakes our parents warned us about.

Kate recalled all the warnings, curdle and raw advice, painful suggestions that Blackwell was not her place, wasn’t built to welcome her in those walls, wasn’t created for her to set her foot in. She had begged and cried, still believing in a lucky fate and yet her parents were right. Her own dignity, the supposedly rightful choice aimed unintentionally against them, the loneliness and fear of her own fall escalated in one big silent explosion, a volcano of errors, and here she was in the dark corner of the room afraid to even look at herself. She remembered the flash, the flight, the wings and waking up without underwear with this ugly, disgusting, sickening feeling of not being herself anymore. She tried to find herself, all the hope, prayers, smiles, kind words, every reassurance, spending two days alone and all she found was nothing.

She got robbed, burglarized so badly, not even by a hateful, unwanted physical contact she didn’t remember, but from her own ground, own stance, own path she was so certain of.

When she was a kid, her family loved to spend time together hiking. It was a cheap and satisfying entertainment, close to nature and God. She lost her path once, got lost in a scary dark forest, wandering between stumps and roots, not able to get any sense of direction. Her uncle found her and scolded her, how terrible it was to even think about the detour from the well-known trial. It was her fault she got lost. Her fault entirely. You don’t find yourself in a dark forest, if you didn’t make a mistake. She did another one, the same one though, detouring, driven by her own deviation. Her dreams and desires, wants and needs got redefined, mirrored, failed her to stand on her own merits. The big words like sin or temptation weren’t even important anymore. It was too much to absorb.

There was no uncle to lead her out, to find the right trail again. She wasn’t sure if the path still existed, or got burned down, buried under an avalanche. She tried to blame somebody, hold onto accusations and charges, but even this was taken away from her, since her memory failed. Everything failed.

Nothing was fine.

She didn’t remember what happened that night. It was only another dark night in the woods, another step between sticky moss and green ferns. It was hard to ask questions, demand answers, since she wasn’t ready for the truth and hated a lie with a passion. Everything was a lie, after all. Everything, even herself.

And then she heard knocking.
This wave clashed on the shore louder than a previous one, almost splashing them from top to bottom. The beach drowned in a taste of mist and the last breath of the sunset, promising to cuddle everyone with darkness. Rachel found a safe shelter from the evening breeze in her girlfriend’s shoulders, snuggling deeper and surrounding herself with her warmth. Chloe welcomed it with bliss, still annoyed at how deep her boots were falling into the sand. The beach walks were always nice, but unforgiving for the blue cowgirl.

“Are you sure you want to go there?” She asked, seeing the light of the campfire on the horizon. They both were reluctant to attend another Blackwell meetup, but this one seemed innocent and pretty safe. Most students were too tired after drinking the whole weekend, classes were starting tomorrow morning and this time they were inseparably together. Both of them had a hidden agenda for showing up tonight though, not even remotely connected to having fun or casual partying. It was more of an obligation, with some marshmallows, free non-alcoholic drinks around people they didn’t care about. A duty of some sort.

“Why not? I want to meet my competition.” Rachel didn’t shy over revealing the real reason why Chloe didn’t have to ask her twice to accompany her today. She didn’t expect the freshman girl to be any kind of danger, but curiosity was her biggest sin.

“Competition?” Her girl laughed, wading through the sand dunes. “You’re kidding me. There is no competition for you.”

The waves pleasantly hit the shore again, remarking their tracks. They tried to find a balance between walking on the safe side drowning in sand, or more steady ground, wet from the ocean sweep. Chloe sighed, wondering why they had parked so far. Watching the sunset together was one thing, walking the whole way down to the campfires was another.

“Good to know, but I’m still curious.” A romantic evening didn’t soften Rachel up and let her forget about Kelly. Not after the pink envelope she saw but still respectfully didn’t open. “I promise, I won’t make any scene. Trust me. I’m not that crazy.”

Chloe chuckled, knowing how far-fetched this statement was.

They were almost there, recognizing some of the faces and familiar voices. Chloe sniffed seeing Kelly first running to them, then noticing Rachel and stopping in place. It was too dark to see her face, but the blue pirate was sure sadness and disappointment appeared in the girl’s eyes. She felt stupid and remorseful, and the feeling intensified when Rachel gave her a short kiss. It could be a coincidence, just a simple kind gesture before they dove into the partying mob, but somehow Chloe doubted it. Rachel liked to mark her territory, they both did.

It was just a kid for fuck’s sake, a lost and hopeful kid. Chloe didn’t have any intentions of making any kind of move or even talking to Kelly again face to face, but damn, she hated to hurt people. It happened sometimes, mostly because of her impatience and unfortunate turn of events, but never intentionally.

She dragged Rachel closer, despite her previous concerns. It wasn’t showing off, it was the need of intimacy. Why did everything have to be complicated, why did people have to be complicated, why was nothing easy anymore.

“News flash, you are hella crazy. Trusting you in that case is really hard.” She whispered, more into
Rachel didn’t have to ask to know what was troubling her girl. They both should act mature, be responsible and solve this issue in the best and possibly gentle way, but she really couldn’t help herself. Proving to Kelly that she had no chance was silly, but the devilish insecurities forced Rachel do to worse things in her life. Being selfish and sometimes cruel in expressing it took the better of her again. Bringing back her temperate and understanding side was getting harder with every step in the deep, friable sand.

“You think I’m gonna punish some poor girl because she falls for you?”

“You punished me today for it.” Chloe murmured, knowing that the one who would be really punished tonight was Kelly, suffering from her high hopes ruined as the sight of the happy couple made her upset. There was no other option though. They were a couple even it meant trashing somebody’s faiths.

Why was it that uncomfortable? Why did she feel like it was leading to something way worse than just a broken crush and a few sleepless nights? Chloe always wanted to play fair, and being fair seemed ambiguous right now.

The waves retreated slightly, giving them more space to walk. The louder and stronger ones were still hiding in the depth, ready to crash onto the shore.

“And you fucking loved being punished.” Rachel sneaked her hand under Chloe’s shirt, touching the bare skin, feeling the small shiver when the cold met the warmth. “Something is telling me, you wouldn’t mind doing it again. Although I can assure you I won’t take any actions against her. Especially not those kinds of actions.”

She tripped and held onto Chloe not looking really dominant. Rachel laughed, and broke the embrace, holding her hand instead. It was easier to walk that way and create a distance, that was very much needed right now. Just for the poor freshman girl’s sake.

“Good, or I would have to do the punishment thing.” Chloe winked, with already a few things in mind. It was nice to feed herself on the promises of passion and some interesting execution.

“Promises, promises.” She heard a dreamy murmur. “Empty promises.”

They walked into the crowd, greeted by the horde of youngsters, got a drink, got into small talk, then separated, lost their grip. Juliet noticing Rachel jumped off her beach towel, gave her a proper hug, providing with all the gossips and plan for the drama club. Chloe joined the blue pirate fan club, praised and tapped on the shoulder, taking the lead in a discussion about her favorite music genre. The kids couldn’t believe that she really saw Firewalk live and when she told the story of how complicated it was to get to the old mill their eyes grew bigger as much as the respect for her.

The waves were still providing a calm pace, adding rhythm to their words and laughs. Being separate didn’t mean estranged though, they were still exchanging gazes and smiles, when no one was watching. Or maybe they were watching, who cared.

Rachel, while being gifted with all the info about the newest Shakespeare play, noticed Kelly sitting by one of the pickup trucks and watching her closely. It wasn’t curiosity, it was sorrow and sadness. Rachel felt for this girl, she had been exactly in her place four years ago, when she saw Chloe with Elliot walking together through the Blackwell campus. She remembered how painful it was and how helpless she felt. The miraculous outcome and the fact that Chloe was indeed hers now didn’t change the fact that the memory was still hurtful.
Juliet was still talking with a huge passion, but Rachel spaced out still watching the poor freshman and inhaling the smoke steadily. Should she talk to her or just keep her distance? The latter seemed way more responsible, even if standing on the contrary to her curiosity, and to be perfectly honest, good fucking heart. She hated to make people miserable, especially intentionally and when they didn’t deserve it. Kelly didn’t deserve it for sure.

The campfire exploded with a high flame, when somebody wisely decided to throw a half empty bottle of vodka into it. Rachel sighed, knowing the party was getting wilder again, but her sight wandered to Kelly again. She noticed the tattoo on her hand, a small lizard wrapping her wrist like a bracelet. Nice work and nice idea, she got envious that she had never thought about it.

It was better not to think about any bracelets though.

Chloe decided to take another drink, discussing very serious issues involving chemistry, science and manufacturing fireworks, when she noticed the group got richer for two more people. Her muscles tensed immediately, and even if she wasn’t in the mood for confrontation, it was about time to sort some things out. She passed her red cup to somebody, snapped out the still lit cigarette in the ocean, and walked fast toward the new guest, bogging in the sand.

“Chloe Price.” Victoria greeted her with nonchalance, pretending that pure coincidence forced her not to ignore her.

“You finally learned my name? I’m impressed. We have to talk.”

Nathan appeared by Victoria’s side, offering her only a physical support. Chloe didn’t care, she could kick his ass too if needed. She suspected the young Prescott could have something to do with Kate’s recent break down, so it would be fully justified anyway.

“Talk?” Victoria shifted in place, not really keen on getting violent. Chloe Price was unstoppable when angry, especially if Rachel was mentioned in a conversation. She wasn’t stupid and knew why this blue punk trash wanted a fight. It was better to back off. “Well, I don’t really feel like it. Try to bully somebody else, Price.”

Chloe was moving closer to her fast, spreading the sand around with her angry steps.

“Cut the shit Victoria.” She pointed at her. “I’m sick of your games and I’m not gonna play another slut scrabble with you. Stay away from my girlfriend. Stay away from us. Don’t provoke her and don’t provoke me.”

If they hoped for it to be a private conversation they both failed. People who were standing close to them got silent, watching and even inaudibly cheering for one of the sides. Chloe was sure the bets started to form already. She should wager a hundred, knowing who would win this time. What had happened to Victoria’s hair, by the way? She looked like some asshole pissed on her head a few hours ago.

“Or what?” Victoria took a challenging pose, putting her fists on her waist. “What are you gonna do, Price? Bite me?”

Biting was out of the question, but Chloe had more missiles in her armory. She moved so close that her fist was a few inches away from Victoria’s face.

“Stay the fuck away or I won’t be responsible for my actions.” She hissed, being really damn serious and pretty happy Rachel wasn’t around, busy with her dead poets’ discussion. She only mentioned her girlfriend in her thoughts but Victoria was obviously gifted with telepathic ability or she was just
simply a bitch.

“Maybe you should wait till you girlfriend becomes a lawyer, if Amber will still be your girlfriend then. It’s so sad to see how this beautiful young love goes to shit.” She hissed back, not even moving an inch.

Chloe dropped her hand, too tempted, way too tempted to do something stupid.

“Shit is all you can see Vicky, you know why?” She spat showing how much of a respect she had for her opponent. “Because you are on the fucking swamp level. That’s my last warning. You bark at her one more time and that will be your last time, do you get it?”

Victoria looked at Nathan, asking, no, demanding a support, something more than just standing in place, but he didn’t even make a single sound. He didn’t walk away though, but was ignoring this boxing-to-wording match altogether. That made Victoria angry. That made her cross the thin red line.

“Ah, boo-hoo, poor, bitchy Rachel finally cried for help and denounced how terribly ineffective she became.” She almost laughed in her face, truly believing she would win this fight. Rachel would respond only with a witty reply, but Chloe was fed up with this fight already, or interested in another kind of confrontation.

“I’m gonna fucking show you effective!” She snapped, and grasped Victoria shirt, dragging her to the ocean. The fashion snake liked to swim in shit, very well, let’s make her fucking swim. It shouldn’t harm her that much and give her a lesson at least. A lesson, that everybody at Blackwell will remember till the end of the year.

“Get your hands off me, psycho!” Victoria yelled, seriously scared. Nathan didn’t even fucking move and the cheering crowd was watching the show with pure enjoyment. It was the best college entertainment possible after all and masterfully done. No one wanted to help or made an effort break it off, no one even said anything when Chloe dragged Victoria into the dark ocean to the point they both were knee-deep in the waves.

The mass at the shore moved a little bit, parted with difficulty, when Rachel ran through them, with her eyes wide open, but didn’t cross the waves’ border. She wouldn’t mind get all wet if that would help her girlfriend, but Chloe didn’t look like somebody who needed assistance.

“Baby, what are you doing?” For the first time in her life Rachel got scared for Victoria Chase. “Stop!”

It was too late.

Chloe was holding Victoria for a moment, looking into her eyes and then she simply dropped her into the salty water. Her victim, unprepared and surprised, splashed into the water as a skipped stone. Rachel covered her mouth with her hands not sure if she should yell for help or laugh. The waves distorted and splashed the fashion snake, not really fashionable at the moment, when she tried to stand up.

Chloe was panting heavily, watching Victoria swaying in her salty misery and then finally, after a few attempts, getting up slowly. When she was sure no serious harm was done, she turned away and just walked to the shore, wandering through the dark water, being completely drained herself. The crowd cheered, some of the students were talking photos. They both would be on YouTube tomorrow. ‘Ding dong the bitch is dead’ would probably be the title.
“You went too far, Price. You went too fucking far!” She heard Victoria yelling. Her voice was trembling with anger, her whole image destroyed and she just looked like a helpless, pathetic water creature. Probably a frog of some sort. Funny, she should pretend that nothing had happened and focus on damage control, but Victoria was too furious to think rationally.

“There’s no such thing as too far.” Chloe yelled back not even turning her head, and wiping off the salty water from her face. She was fucking done.

Chloe reached into her pocket, to drag another smoke, but everything was fucking wet, her lighter was wet too, damn it. She threw the wasted pack away, not worrying about littering. Then she remembered about the letter in her back pocket and felt even worse.

She noticed her shocked girl waiting for her on the safe shore. Chloe, finally out of the water, raised her hands expecting another argument. “Don’t give me shit, Rach, not now.”

Rachel touched her cold cheek, with such admiration in her hazel eyes, that Chloe’s heart skipped a beat. She was really proud of her again. She really fucking loved it, after weeks of humiliation, stupid arguments, picking up. Violence never solved a problem, they both knew it, but it was satisfying. Too fucking satisfying.

“I won’t give you shit. It was hot. Inappropriate and dangerous, but hot.” Rachel kissed her gently. “I love you.”

“You’re terrible. I love you too.” The adrenaline was slowly wearing down, and Chloe started to shake in the cold, night breeze. Rachel held her close, trying to offer as much warmth as possible, even if it meant getting wet herself. Her paladin in white shining armor was drained from top to bottom. She could hear the blue heart beating fast, after a freaking ocean battle. Damn, she was indeed engaged to a pirate. Who would have thought?

Victoria also found her way back, getting out from the ocean. Nathan didn’t even offer a towel, what a fucking tool, he was way more gallant for the nun-bitch, fuck him. His reaction made her question herself, her dedication to this friendship, their relation in general. Nathan didn’t even blink, when everything was falling apart around her. Victoria worked so hard to gain the authority among those people, and now everything was destroyed. Chloe Price destroyed everything she worked on so hard. “You will fucking pay for it!” She yelled again, close to crying from frustration.

The blue rebel didn’t respond, trying to control instead, and it was Rachel’s turn to step up. “We can’t wait, Tori! We really can’t wait!” She yelled back, trying to protect her girlfriend, moving forward, showing everybody she’s in the game and wouldn’t backtrack if Chloe would be attacked. They were inseparable after all.

Chloe felt stupid, especially when a lot of people tried to congratulate her for such a bold move. When the anger faded she remembered about the photos that Victoria had, some intrigue she was weaving in her net. There was always hope that the supposed evidence got destroyed with Victoria’s now wet phone. She got tired thinking about how much energy they would have to put into the future fight. It wasn’t the end. It was the beginning.

They started a war.

Rachel was by her side, even took of her jacket and wrapped it around her arms, trying to warm her up a little. It didn’t help shit, now both of them were shaking. Juliet came to the rescue offering her beach towel. The drama club people weren’t such buffoons after all. Somebody passed her a beer, but she refused her well-deserved award. Everybody felt festive except her and Victoria herself.
“Let’s go back home baby, alright?” Rachel whispered softly. “What the hell got into you?”

“Well, at least I didn’t try to kill her with a damn plank for once.” Chloe watched Victoria leaving the party with Nathan following her around like a lost puppy. Then she looked at her girlfriend, and got stunned with a surprise. “Wait, it’s turning you on?”

“Three years and you’re still clueless after all.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “Why do you think I want to go home?”

They had a long way to walk, since they parked so damn far away. A romantic sunset might cost them both a cold or a sore throat tomorrow. They said their goodbyes, achieving even more praise and then lurked into the darkness of the empty beach.

Rachel turned around once again, noticing Kelly also leaving the party and disappearing on the other side. The girl had been witnessing the whole event for sure. It had to be nice for this freshman to see Chloe drained entirely, it would be for Rachel four years ago, damn, it still was, but the reason behind it was more than hurtful.

The strong waves came back, now defeating every sand resistance on the shore. Their steps became splashy but they didn’t care, since their shoes were wet regardless. They just wanted to get back home.

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She wanted to open her eyes, but her eyelids seemed so heavy and puffy now. Kate didn’t remember when she stopped crying, if she ever had. Her reality featured only sleep, some scraps of food and breaking down in tears, over and over again.

‘Kate? It’s Max.’ She heard a soft voice, so close to the door. ‘Can we talk, please? I know something terrible happened to you. I won’t judge you… I just want to help.’

She really didn’t want to talk, she didn’t want to respond, but it was nice to actually hear somebody’s voice. Somebody cared enough to come here in the middle of the night and keep knocking, even if the annoying wooden tap was making her nauseous. Kate leaned on the door and let herself to slide onto the floor, sitting awkwardly on the carpet. She didn’t have the strength to stand tall anyway.

“I’m not sure if anybody can.” She whispered, not caring if anybody would hear her voice. Max did apparently, she could hear a rapid shift on the other side. Her new friend was also sitting at her doorstep. It had to look weird for all the dorm’s habitants, but Max was never bothered by what everybody else was thinking of her. A true exception.

“What happened, Kate? If you don’t mind talking about it…”

Kate hid her face in her hands, still too ashamed to even think about a serious answer to this question. She almost felt Max sitting exactly in the same position on the other side. It was as close as she would let anybody to be now. Being trapped inside was safe. Being trapped inside of herself was way worse.

“I don’t know if Nathan Prescott helped me or hurt me.” Kate finally found some words to describe
it, even if the horror sounded so innocent, putting it so mildly. “I’m not really sure if he did something to me.”

The door between the hallway and the dark forest was like a gate between two worlds, two different states of mind, a desperate hope and plain lack of it. Max was still there, Kate heard her moving. They both had problems to find the perfect words, to buckle the message down in any human langue.

Every sentence was an effort, a dangerous dance between the rotten roots and mossy stones, when luck was more important than all the knowledge and experience. Stripped out of good fate they both had to trust their instincts, so validated and outdated right now. So spoiled.

“Whatever happened, it’s not your fault, ok?” Max stated firmly, desperately hoping for the best. They both knew it wasn’t that simple. It wasn’t only about the blame, who was responsible. The objective, the ultimate goal seemed like the top of the mountain, but they hadn’t even started hiking, they couldn’t even find a common trail.

Kate was too tired to hide her doubts, defeated in her shame. It didn’t matter after all, everybody knew, everybody saw her at the party. Everybody except the person she talked to right now. Maybe that’s why she could find enough courage to finally whisper more.

“I don’t know that, Max. Maybe I… I crossed the line.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Max’s voice was calm though, soft, soothing. She tried desperately to give her some support, something Kate would be able to rely on, to hold onto. Her friend wasn’t ready to accept any helping hand yet, still confused by where the bottom and the top were, the left and right, since she had lost any sense of direction. Any help seemed like fantasy story, a nightmare filled with abnormal hope.

“You weren’t there.” Kate stated simply.

How to lead somebody out of the woods if they keep themselves locked inside?

Max wasn’t ready for it, not trained nor prepared. She wasn’t a professional therapist, far away from it and now she had to deal with a situation she had tried to avoid for years now. She shook her head, hearing how easily Kate retracted inside herself, defined not only by her own guilt but the lack of guidance. Max couldn’t teach her how to swim, but now desperately wanted to keep her on the surface before it would be too late.

“I didn’t have to be. I know you are a good person, a good soul. I know I can trust you. You can’t blame yourself for whatever happened.” Shit, she was repeating herself, assuring and mumbling. Maybe she got ahead of herself, feeling all the goodness in jeopardy.

Nothing was fine.

“I’m not that sure, Max. I don’t know what to believe in anymore.”

Never cry for the same reason twice, and yet Max was close to tears, blaming herself badly. She wasn’t there, she couldn’t be, but still it was her fault, her guilt, her responsibility even if nothing could be done. All the months of trying, begging and desperation led them to nothing, all of them. The future Max dreamed of was a big screaming question mark, filled with terror and fear. Was that the definition of future in general though?

“I know. You have to be strong.” She kept her voice calm almost by a miracle. “Everything will be alright, I promise.”
“You can’t promise anything, Max.” Kate whispered back. “You can’t do anything.”

Crying. She heard Kate crying and it broke her heart, shattered it to pieces. Not able to hold her friend, Max placed her palm against the door, trying to provide an invisible hug, a virtual embrace. Helpless she stayed there for long moment, not daring to even move. Max couldn’t know but her move was mirrored on the other side, when Kate erupted in a desperate sob.

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The campus at night was almost empty and Kelly was more than grateful for silence and peace. The only person visible in the dark shadows was Samuel, who was always on duty preparing the yard for a new bright day. She sighed deeply, slowly walking through the parking lot and then noticed one more person passing by.

“Hi, Mr. Jefferson.” She greeted him, not hoping for the teacher to even notice or respond. Jefferson stopped though and looked at her closely with true concern. He was obviously in a rush, dangling his car keys in hand, ready to get back home, or wherever else he was going.

If he stopped, it would be rude just to walk away. She really wanted to be left alone, get back to her room and cry, listen to some stupid happy music and browse internet memes, just to make herself feel better. The student’s obligations prevailed though, and she stood in place hoping this conversation wouldn’t take long.

“Hi, Kelly. Is everything ok? You look... troubled.” Jefferson made a gesture like he wanted to put his hand on her shoulder. A simple reassuring gesture, but he wasn’t sure if that wouldn’t be too much. The care and concern in his sight seemed sincere though.

She wasn’t sure how he knew her name, but didn’t care enough to ask. It was a teacher’s job to know stuff like that, right?

“I’m fine. I just had a hard day I guess.” Kelly sighed, scratching her wrist. The tattoo felt like a real lizard crawling under her skin and nipping it from the inside. She did it just after moving to Arcadia Bay, to punish her parents, mark her independence. Now it felt silly.

Jefferson was watching her, observing, like he knew exactly what she was feeling, what she was going through. It wasn’t just blunt curiosity, it was compassion and understanding, a weird connection between two people who never talked before. Kelly couldn’t attend his class even if she really wanted to. Jefferson was only doing lectures for college, not for the Blackwell High and she hoped to join his photography group one day. One day, when she would forget about the humiliating evening at the beach.

“I see.” He said slowly, still playing with his keys, but not taking a step towards his fancy Maserati. “If you want to talk, my door is always open. I know you have to struggle with a lot of burden and social pressure now. The first year in a boarding school is always the worst. You are not alone, Kelly. We all try to make you feel like home.”

Not all for sure. Kelly nodded fast, thinking about the hazel eyes who were following her the whole evening, warning and putting her in her place. She really hated Rachel right now, not because she was with Chloe, but because she made it so damn obvious. No one had to be that obvious. It was kinda cruel. Fuck Rachel.
“Thank you, Mr. Jefferson. I really appreciate it.”

“You are more than welcome. We can always talk, really. If something troubling happens, or you just feel down, let’s talk. I mean it.”

It was truthful and friendly. Very friendly but not in an inappropriate way. Jefferson knew how to balance his behavior, so no one would presume that he was striving for young girls. Always respectful, he was way better than that, and she was only fourteen. Kelly felt safe in his presence, even now, reassured that nothing bad would happen, that she found an ally in the dark hallways of the new school, somebody who would understand her and maybe give some guidance. Somebody who felt right, who she felt connected to. Somebody civil.

“I... Maybe I will, thank you.” Kelly smiled lightly, for the first time this evening. “It’s really hard sometimes.” She added shyly, letting herself to share part of her trouble.

“I know it is. I spent my teenage years in boarding school as well. I know the struggle. The line to the shower, stupid fights, sleepless nights, first crushes...”

Chloe. Damn, she thought about Chloe again. Jefferson took a step back, feeling he went too far, even if he didn’t mean to. Did he really understand what she was going through? Could anybody understand how painful and mortifying it was?

It was too late to ask those questions, and they both should go their separate ways. For now.

“Yeah... Well, I have to go.” She decided to make the first move to break off. “Good night, Mr. Jefferson.”

“Good night, Kelly,” she heard when rushing to the dorm. “Sleep well.”

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When they came back home, they had to be quiet. It was never easy, especially with an improvised blindfold involved and provocative moans, this time with Chloe in charge. Rachel didn’t mind, on the contrary. It was impressive how creative her girlfriend could be, and how easily she was switching from cute and adorable to demanding and tempting. Tenderness was always Chloe’s secret weapon though, used in the last expected moments and melting Rachel with every single mark. The payback for the morning wasn’t that rough, but took longer, a few hours to be exact and left them entirely exhausted and damn satisfied. They both hoped that Joyce and David wouldn’t get suspicious finding Chloe’s wet jacket abandoned on the stairs and Rachel’s shirt hanging from the handrail, but they were too baffled by the laziness to get up and remove all the incriminating evidence. They would worry tomorrow, or not at all, cleaning it up while rushing to school. Joyce and David would notice anyway. They weren’t that blind after all.

They took a shower together, to wash out all the sand and salt, long prolonged since it was a morning Sunday ritual, and then naked, raw and tired, fell asleep together forgetting about the science notes entirely. At least Chloe did, since she closed her eyes and wandered into her dreams a second after her face touched the pillow.

Rachel couldn’t sleep though. She watched Chloe, caressing her arms slowly, listening to her slow and calm heartbeat. Her little blue warrior, impatient and loving, her own damn pirate. It was a hella
day and she shouldn’t be surprised that the dreams didn’t want to visit her yet, but knew it was more
than just a strike of an adrenaline still buzzing in her veins. Maybe it was the time to take her girl’s
advice into consideration and finish at least one thing successfully, not leaving it open and hanging.

She got up carefully, untying herself from Chloe’s arms and trying not to wake her up with a rapid
move. The mirror in their room was way smaller than the one downstairs, but still tall enough to
frame her whole figure. Rachel had to take only a few steps to get closer watching her reflection in
the darkness. There was a tad of moonlight scattering the shadow, but she really didn’t need to see
everything in detail. She knew herself too well.

Alright, let’s fucking say it. It shouldn’t be that hard anyway. It was just a word, nothing else, not a
definition, not permanent, not hurtful. Three damn letters, not a big deal. She joked about it for years,
argued about it with Steph and Chloe, even Max was dragged into those chit-chats a few times. It
was about time to cross this line, to force herself, for the fucking greater good.

“I…” She started with a whisper and couldn’t finish. Rachel Amber, the famous and brave, confident
and bold couldn’t finish a single freaking sentence in basic English, grammar 101.

Why? Why the fuck? She was plainly fucking naked in front of a mirror, nothing covered, exposed
as much as possible and the only one awake. Why couldn’t she even force herself to say a single
whisper, being her one and only witness?

Was it even the truth? Maybe she was only attracted to Chloe after all. But then, if that was a lie, it
wouldn’t be that hard. She knew it wasn’t a lie, her conscience reminded her of it every day. It
wasn’t a complicated and convoluted issue, not an open question she kept asking herself for years.
Being labeled was one thing, being sincere with herself yet another. Her training in honesty was
taking forever, and right now Rachel felt like nothing had really changed, she was still a coward, a
liar, like her father, like most people around. She really needed to say it, especially after the war they
had just started and was just losing an important battle against herself.

Rachel tried to say it again, but not even a single whisper escaped her lips this time and she felt tears
under her eyelids, burning and itching. She touched her own shadowed reflection, first with her
fingers, then with a fist, close to breaking the glass even if that would cost her some stitches. That
wouldn’t solve the problem though, it would only make it worse. Rachel felt so damn guilty for
failing herself again. First this swimming pool party, now this. She had to get a grip and finally do
something, put herself together, give herself some closure.

The mirror was there, waiting.

For fucks sake.

“I…” She tried again and her voice broke. The drama queen in her prime, always a troublemaker,
always a hell riser. Burning half a state wasn’t a problem, being stabbed in a stupid fight wasn’t
either. Three letters were. Damn freaking mirror.

“I’m gay.” She finally stated.

It was a relief. And then she started crying like a little kid without any reason. She had to be quiet,
but the sob got louder, just like a lonely scream of a free bird, who wasn’t that free after all.

Chloe appeared in the reflection, and her warmth and calm arms wrapping her appeared in reality.
She didn’t have to say anything, just holding, protecting, not asking for anything or questioning. Just
being there. She wasn’t an intruder. She was part of her. Hers.
Rachel made a gesture, as if trying to explain herself, crack a joke, a smile, but it was too late to put on an act, to pretend or take a step back. Her girl understood, really understood now and was rocking her slowly in her arms, showing her that Rachel didn’t fail, didn’t let herself down. And Chloe, still sleepy, barely awake, was proud, really proud of her.

It was good to see all of it in this damn, fucking mirror.

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She could blame every one of them. She could yell at Chloe, asking why she broke the promise, why the hell she didn’t watch the girl, getting involved with a completely different affair instead. She could demand an explanation from Rachel, pointing how important it was to behave for one single night. She could even blame Steph for taking this gig, regardless of the danger that her friend had to face that night. No contract was as important as somebody’s life. They all would be remorseful and apologetic, but it wouldn’t change a thing.

Nothing would actually really help.

Hearing Kate’s helpless cry on the other side of the door, Max bowed her head analyzing everything once again. There was only one way to stop it, to make it right. One very risky way, a small chance, even if that could get them all in trouble, but she didn’t really have a choice. It was time to wrap it up, finish it with a bang, start living again, not worrying over another terror or broken life.

Max raised her head as her eyes sparked in the shadows. She knew exactly what was needed to be done.

She was ready.
"A gun? Are you kidding me?"

Rachel looked at her girlfriend in disbelief and shock, taken completely off guard. She had been woken up today by the serenade of clangs, rattles and noises of sawing rusty metal, so it was particularly hard for her to actually express any enthusiasm whatsoever, but this idea was more than unpleasant. It was plainly dangerous and stupid.

Chloe's grimace danced between a bold grin and an apologizing smirk while she wiped her hands first in the old rag, then noticing that it didn't do any good, in her own shirt. The blue mechanic was already covered in grease, oil and garage dirt, even if she had started an hour ago. The dark smudges created a map of her morning struggle with the newest wreck David had brought home, engaging them both in yet another auto-repair adventure. Imagining her with a weapon seemed silly, especially now when she looked like a garage devil and the whole thing seemed more like Halloween prank, not a serious plan. But damn, Chloe was serious.

Rachel sighed.

"The gun wasn't my idea, it's her birthday wish." Her girl shrugged. She knew it was an unusual request and it made her feel damn uncomfortable to bring it to Rachel's attention, but not sharing this part of the plan could cause another series of arguments that she would gladly prefer to avoid.

"Birthday wish my ass." Rachel snapped, passing the newest beat-up beast and walking fast to her own car. "Max wants you to bring a gun to the trip today? For real?" She still couldn't believe it.

Chloe sighed, sensing that this would be yet another crack on the bond shared between Rachel and her childhood friend. Her girl's relations with Max were complicated to say the least. They didn't quarrel or argue, and the previous spark of jealousy was long gone, but they could hardly call themselves friends. A common respect and being part of the same circle was the strong base for their interactions, but Rachel was certainly tired of all the secrets, mysterious undertones and witty responses to unspoken questions. Max seemed to throw her out of balance every time they started a serious discussion, but despite all odds she always seemed to be more responsible than requesting a weapon to celebrate during her eighteenth birthday party; a party that was still pretty enigmatic in its formula.

The bright light of the day embraced Rachel with a chilly touch, as a total reverse of the dark and warm garage filled with the smell of the metal dust and numb air. The world had changed within a few steps, her worries didn't give up so easily. Chloe followed her to the roadster expecting a rant, still not certain if sharing Max's wish wasn't a mistake. She could just take the gun without saying a word. Fucking honesty.

"A gun and a shovel. Don't look at me like that. We also are supposed to wear hoodies, paint our faces black and be mysterious and shit." Chloe added, wondering if she should also share the other request, but Rachel seemed too angry and preoccupied with the first one. Concerning her with more information would certainly end in a serious dispute. It was way too early for that.

"Hoodies? Oh." The birthday party was planned way differently than Rachel imagined. Well, damn, she would have to save the newly bought skirt for a different occasion. "Alright, never mind. A gun is out of the question though. How did you even plan to get it? It's not like you could just go to a store and buy it."
"From David's locker?" Chloe rolled her eyes, like it was the most obvious solution on earth.

"And he would just give you one because you ask nicely?" Rachel dropped her books and the package onto the passenger's seat and started looking for her keys. She should really put the hood on, since the summer was long gone and Oregon's fall wasn't merciful for the owners of convertibles. "I know you work on the cars together now, but I don't think he would be so..."

Chloe came closer, thinking for a moment to play with the blue earring, but staining the biggest of Amber's treasures would put her in even more trouble. She had to find a way to distract her girlfriend somehow, otherwise she would be flooded with warning text messages and even phone calls urging her not to do whatever she promised to do.

"Irresponsible?" A hand, still dirty and almost black from the car oil, stopped Rachel from opening the door and sliding into the driver's seat calmly caressing the top of her palm. It wasn't a grasp, just a soft touch. The tenderness was always Chloe's biggest weapon and secret asset, stifling the irritation immediately, distracting and transforming it into a different kind of fire. She hoped for that outcome and she didn't get disappointed. Rachel had to double try to hide her smirk. What was with this girlfriend of hers that was actually making her shiver with all those tender gestures. It should be illegal.

"Crazy." She pointed, turning to Chloe and still trying to avoid getting dirty. "I love you, but I won't let you be near any explosive materials, including weapons of any sorts anytime soon. I need you alive and unharmed. If you want to play pirates again you have to get a plastic sabre instead, sorry." She stated firmly, pretty sure that David was sharing the same concern. He wouldn't let Chloe borrow a gun and she wouldn't try to steal one, right?

"I don't think it's about pirates. I think Max is planning something bigger." The greasy fingers were playing yet another serenade on her hand, taking Rachel's mind out of possible danger and forcing her to think about something entirely different, even more dangerous especially with all this repair filthy shit around. It seemed like Chloe was planning on something bigger too and it wouldn't be unwanted.

Damn you, Chloe Price and your dirty, beautiful hands.

"Yeah, like robbing a bank. With a shovel." The blond fury succeeded with sedating herself and staying on topic. "Baby, please. We will go, we will have fun... or whatever else she is planning, we will give her a damn nice shovel for her birthday, but no guns!" She gave her girl a warning look. Chloe bit her lip with a devilish grin. Rachel gasped. "No. No! Don't look at me like that. No."

The car door got slammed, while Chloe pressed her onto the red roadster with her body, raising her hands in the air to show she had absolutely no intention to smear any of the car's sweat and blood on her girl's jacket. Since Rachel was blocked by the blue hips and not very keen on pushing her away, there was only one way out. She touched Chloe's cheek requesting her to lean over and when it happened, she kissed her slowly. Her girlfriend immediately tried to drag her closer, but she stopped herself in an awkward position not sure what to do with her filthy hands. They both liked this escape route. Rachel smiled with triumph, biting her lower lip, while her finger drew an uneven map through her cleavage, detouring a little bit to the left and right, going down through the folds of her t-shirt to her abdomen and taking a pit stop on her belt buckle.

Chloe gasped sharply, still trapped in her own auto-repair mess and unable to take an action. Another kiss came, still tender, but more passionate, since Rachel really liked the adorable hesitance and there was always something about her girl and the cars that was always turning her on. She outlined the smudges, tracing yet another road, this time through her arms, shoulders and up to her neck, waking a shiver after shiver, playing with the internal ignition and starting the powerful engine of the blue
passion. A soft moan escaped her lips, fully planned and carefully executed, just to drive her own mechanic even more crazy. The cartography paid off, so Chloe, always hungry for her, pressed Rachel even harder against the car demanding more, ready for a ride, bumpy road or not. She got more, because why the hell not.

They broke off finally, since reaching the crossroads and the next turn would be too risky to take, especially in the open garage and with whole the neighborhood as an audience. There was no reason to tease, no purpose to provoke more, since Rachel was already late and Chloe was completely drained by the engine's intestines.

"Where are you going by the way?"

"Blackwell. I want to talk to Kate. And deliver something sweet."

"You delivered something sweet already." Chloe finally took a step back, having a hard time letting her go, but the car keys in Rachel's hands were humming with impatience. It was time to hit the road. "Let me know if you need an accomplice."

"I'm sorry, stranger, I'm already taken and don't consider any applications." Ah damn, this smirk again, appearing always when she mentioned her relationship status. Rachel gracefully slipped onto the driver's seat, trying to adjust her hair after the nice distraction and switched the key into the ignition. The loud purr of the old roadster sounded like an impatient farewell, the end credits' song to a morning story.

"I will call you. No guns." She pointed at her girlfriend and backed off from the driveway, pressing way too much on gas than she should have.

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Dana yawned and stretched lightly, then looked at her phone exasperated even more than five minutes ago. The hallway felt empty, like a limbo between the alive heaven of the cafeteria and the haunted hell of the offices and classrooms. Fast steps on the marble floor and the murmur of small talk were the only sounds filling the narrow space, echoed by high ceilings in a muffled whisper. Sitting here on a Sunday morning felt like an exile, a punishment, a cold injustice even. She shifted on the bench and put on her sunglasses. It was better to stay hidden, even if it almost made her blind.

"Victoria is acting like super weird." Taylor murmured, bubbling on her coffee with an obnoxious sound. Dana sighed. It was so freaking lame. "I was wondering what she's doing. She just sits in this principal's office every day and plays secretary, like she forgot about her friends and stuff."

"She's like super smart." Her friend shrugged. "I don't know what she's planning, but it will be bad for Price. And for Rachel too."

"Oh, I'm sure." And the conversation died again.

Chloe Price truly humiliated Victoria in the most disrespectful and disgusting manner in front of everybody and didn't even show any kind of remorse, acting like nothing had happened. The worst part was that Chase seemed genuinely hurt by it and had been hiding even since. They both tried to talk to her, but she didn't offer any explanation except a firm grimace, that changed her lips into a simple, obstinate line.
To be perfectly honest, Dana and Taylor felt abandoned. It wasn't nice. It was super lame. Victoria Chase was avoiding every social event at any cost and was hardly speaking to her friends.

The door on the other side of the corridor opened suddenly, and Kelly Davis walked out, engaged in a passionate conversation with Mark Jefferson. The teacher seemed to be fond of the young freshman and smiled a few times, listening to her carefully. Kelly was speaking fast, waving her hands to point some important part of her argument and every reaction of the famous photographer was crafting more joyful sparks in her eyes.

"What is this freshman doing with Jefferson? Isn't she too young for his class?" Taylor threw out an empty coffee cup, but kept the straw, still biting and chewing it. It was annoying to the point that Dana truly wanted to strangle her and was very close to do so. Victoria was seriously the only reason why she was hanging out with this bitch.

"I know, right?" She agreed regardless, seeing how Kelly started to walk through the hallway still accompanied by the teacher. They discussed something eagerly, but the hallow hall melted the words into one indistinct mumble. "Maybe she has a crush on him or something."

"And no chance." Taylor giggled.

Half of the school was obsessed with the handsome teacher, who seemed very laid back and friendly. Most of the faculty was usually strict and Jefferson's attitude was a pleasant variety, as much as his amazing presence. He never crossed the line with any female student, but was always willing to listen and help to cope with existing or imaginary problems. His reputation encouraged a lot of young girls to ask him for advice and he never refused such a request.

Kelly's monologue, prolonged already, had to end when Jefferson finally excused himself and rushed to the stairs to the first floor. The young girl, still gallingly happy trotted to the school's gate. Taylor and Dana watched her carefully but even this one bitchy freshman ignored them completely. What a fucking torment.

Kelly was about to open the exit door, but it almost got slammed in her face when Rachel Amber burst in, creating an even more unpleasant reverberation in the hallway. They both stopped for a second, watching each other penetratingly. Both girls looked pretty similar, with parallel taste in clothes, long blond hair and a weird preference in incomplete jewellery. Rachel was a few years older and way more attractive, but Kelly could easily compete with her in the looks department if she tried more makeup, and her smile was way more natural and less affected. They engaged in a sight fight, striking some serious thunders at each other and Taylor and Dana watched the whole performance like a tennis match, moving their eyes from one girl to another. Finally, Kelly scratched her tattooed wrist, smirked lightly and walked out accepting her defeat. Amber frowned, shrugged and headed to the cafeteria.

Taylor and Dana looked at each other in surprise. The connection between Kelly and Jefferson was easy to explain since the young freshman was obviously crushing on the hot teacher. The look that Rachel gave this poor desperate girl was noteworthy. What was Amber planning to do to this freshman?

Dana sighed deeply, wishing Victoria was here. It would be so much fun to build some theories and gossips.

***
The cafeteria, the school's thumping heart, was always pounding hard and steady during weekends, but with a different rhythm than in the actual class time. The beat was way more hectic from Monday to Friday, when the students were just storming in and out, grabbing something to eat and eloping a minute later. Sundays were always slow, changing Blackwell's infamous restaurant into a meeting place where everybody gathered, protecting themselves from boredom and loneliness. The human song in hundreds of voices was also different, less loud, more constant and balanced. Even the local students who could easily stay at home and didn't have to avoid the dull walls of the dorm were visiting readily, hoping for new accomplices, getting into new projects and finding new friends.

Max was surprisingly in a great mood not only because she really liked the buzz of Blackwell's meeting spot or because it was her birthday that she decided not to celebrate much, but because of the internal harmony and peace she had reached after making a certain decision a week ago. Last week was difficult for her and all her friends, when she had to try very hard not to judge and accuse them of sloppiness, neglect and point out all the broken promises. Kate was still suffering from the horrors that had happened, and the apologies, although constantly repeated, were more annoying than helpful. It was time to put it to rest, leave it behind, fix it and move on.

Max thought out everything carefully, made notes, organized, strategized and was about to execute her secret plan. It felt almost like Christmas morning when she was about to open her presents and couldn't wait for others to see what she gifted them with. It was a pretty grim parallel, but the excitement was similar indeed.

A few more hours and everything would be done.

She would be able to start living again, not bothering Steph with her problems and visions. She would be able to see how Chloe and Rachel grew stronger together, even if seeing their shared obsession with each other was still troubling for her from time to time. She would start planning something new, something unexpected. A future unknown, as unknown as it should be. Max smiled widely for the first time in weeks, looking at her notepad.

"Did you miss me, Birthday girl?" A quick kiss from her own girlfriend surprised her and she giggled a little bit. Steph, amazed with the reaction, jumped on the seat by her side, putting her backpack under the table. It hit the tiled floor with a heavy clang.

"I always miss you when you're not around." She gave Steph another short kiss, still not fully comfortable being affectionate in public. Somebody whistled at them, somebody cheered, they even got the attention of the Bigfoot football team; the privilege of kissing in front of the whole school. "Did you prepare everything?"

"I did." Steph kicked the backpack lightly. "I still don't know where you're going with this, but I like surprises."

"You hate surprises, but I appreciate the effort. Thank you for doing this. It's important for me." Max squeezed her hand and then dove under the table to check the contents of the military tactical backpack, that looked like it was just stolen from an army supplies store. Steph thought about everything, even the presence. Half of the Bigfoots, the notorious Blackwell football team got extremely excited and loud, imagining a different reason why she would've disappeared between her girlfriend's knees and Steph encouraged them even more showing them the finger.

The flashlights, the hoodies, a crowbar. Even a power bank. Steph didn't miss a thing from the list. Max came back to her seat holding the glass jars of the face paint and trying to read the instructions carefully. Being secretive was one thing, being possibly allergic to one of the ingredients was
Steph was watching her charily, ignoring the football jerks altogether. Their creativity reached the level high when they noticed what Max was holding. The obnoxious, loud and sultry comments about the possible use of face paint during a lesbian sexual encounter were more than ridiculous. Fucking assholes.

"So, only the four of us?" The DND queen hated those jerks with all her heart, and was very close to walking to their table and starting a tantrum, but it wouldn't do any good anyway. "You don't want any backup?"

"No, we'll be fine. Backup could be… problematic I guess."

The unspoken suggestion that they also should invite the North brothers wasn't stupid or bizarre. If it was a proper birthday party, Max would call them for sure, but today wasn't about celebration. The discovery might be too shocking for Drew and Mikey, and she was worrying enough about Chloe's reaction. Her only hope was Rachel Amber, who obviously had some magic powers and was able to calm the blue pirate with a single gesture or a warning look. Hopefully she would keep her supernatural battery charged and up to date.

"Is this surprise nice?" Steph asked, standing up and ready to check out the laundry. Last time she found her wet clothes in the sink and didn't want the situation to occur again, despite of the surreptitious trip planned.

"Nice?" Max put the jar of face paint back on the table and smiled archly. "Some people will cry from joy, I guess."

A quick kiss and she was left alone with her maps, notes, numbers and all the ingredients. Not for long though. Just a few minutes after Steph vanished in the hallway, Max noticed Rachel appearing in the entrance. Chloe's girl scrutinized the space in an imperious manner and noticing Max, she started to maneuver through the tables in her direction. People greeted her with pure sympathy and some of them in amazement. The football team cheered her name, just like the times when she was the head cheerleader, but Rachel put them in place with one suggestive smile. She might reject her queen bee's crown, but she was still loved and respected.

Max was watching her, thinking how rarely they talked face to face, without their girlfriends around. They weren't truly friends, not even close, and the hope that it would change anytime soon got abandoned a long time ago. Rachel had made a few adorable attempts to know her better, but Max was way too overprotective of her own secrets, so despite the struggles and even common efforts this road led them nowhere. Chloe's biggest treasure accepted the situation with grace, still acting civil and courteous.

Her gallantry was showing especially now, when she took a seat in front of her, unpacked her bag and presented a small cake. The Bigfoots team, focused their whole attention on Rachel, looked at her with amazement, and their discussion changed its course from sultry to hungry. Not a big of a difference, judging by the vocabulary.

"Happy Birthday, Max!" Rachel winked at her. "I heard we will celebrate in secret today. Soooo, I brought you some unhealthy amount of sugar, since it might be troubling to actually give it to you later. With love, from all of us."

The small chocolate cake was lacking the candles, but the number '18' and her name were more than enough. Candles, who needed them? They might be dangerous with Rachel in the same room. Max noticed a small, blue pirate ship iced on the side, a sign that Chloe was part of the surprise.
Should they hug or something?

"Thank you. It looks really great." Max made the attempt, extremely awkward to begin with, but the table, cake, maps and the face paint were in the way so Rachel just waved it off and they stayed in place.

The former Blackwell queen looked at her fingernails, black from car grease and hid her hands in the long sleeves of her flannel. Here you go, dating a mechanic. Although it was still better to make out with garage Chloe than Chloe with a gun dressed as a burglar. She was wondering if asking Max about the weapon request would be appropriate, but since her girlfriend wouldn't get it anyway, it seemed silly.

Because she wouldn't, right?

"You're welcome." She wasn't usually as direct as Chloe but cut to the chase instantly, not even trying to interrogate Max about tonight since it was obviously pointless. "I don't really want to spoil the festive atmosphere, but how is Kate? Any progress?"

"A little. She's pretty down after all of this and doesn't remember much." Max shrugged, trying to think how to slice the cake without having a knife. Damn, she had a freaking crowbar in the backpack, but no blades. She forgot to put it on her list and it would probably be a good addition for the resource kit.

"Memory can be a bitch." Rachel nodded slowly, but her eyes got darker, when she recalled a shitload of things that should be forgotten altogether.

"Tell me about it." Yet another of the famously mysterious Caulfield's responses. Every time she was talking to Max, the weird undertone had to be included. Always. "You want to talk to Kate." It wasn't even a question.

"Yeah, that's my secret plan." Rachel smirked looking at the cake, lying side by side by the small glass jars of the face paint. The color and facture were pretty similar, and she hoped that Max wouldn't make a terrible mistake, treating herself with chemicals instead of chocolate. "Except the delivery of course, and wishing you an amazing afternoon. I hope Kate wouldn't mind." She added quickly.

"I don't know, but you can try. That might actually be very helpful. Thank you for doing it." Max touched her hand. Rachel frowned in response. It was probably the first time the other girl expressed such a gesture. Max looked very relaxed today, probably the most stress-free she had ever seen her. Secrecy kept this girl peaceful, good to know.

"Hey, I haven't done anything yet. Thank me if it works." She brushed off the topic along with Max's palm, sensing some serious discussion about her responsibility of Kate's misery. Rachel wasn't in the mood for a guilt trip, even if she felt it was partly her fault. It was better to ask some pointless questions then. "And what are you planning for today? Chloe was hella mysterious about it."

"Life needs a little mystery, Rachel. You will see."

A mixture of curiosity and irritation was more than visible in every snap of Rachel's fingers hidden in her sleeves. She hated surprises even more than Steph. Her friends were using her own quotes against her hella often, but Max was dancing on a thin line, almost provoking with her soft and knowing tone. Every time Rachel was so close to get this girl, to actually like her, another weird reply was ruining all the good intentions.
The query was futile from the start anyway.

"So, there is one thing that bothers me..." Rachel looked at the football team. The jerks were whispering something to each other planning some stupid misfit, losing interest in the sweet treat they couldn't even try. "Chloe told me that Kate was under the supervision of Mark Jefferson, the teacher you warned me about."

"Yes, and as you can see..." Max's eyebrow rose a little. "It didn't end well."

Rachel's level of keeping up with the mysterious bullshit was reaching its limit. She looked at her intensely, attempting to find an answer with a constellation of freckles. Everybody had a secret but this one was dangerous not only to Kate, but to everybody around.

"Do you think he had something to do with this?"

This question was more expected although Max hadn't assumed that Rachel would be so straightforward, especially in Blackwell's cafeteria where everybody knew the name and face behind it. She tapped the table a few times, locking them both in a weird state of silence, enchanting in the awkwardness. The world around them kept moving, talking, laughing, but Rachel was waiting and she was about to sit here till the end of the world if necessary. Kate, the cake and everything else were just an excuse to finally ask about Jefferson. About time.

The Bigfoots started to cheer for one of them, encouraging the poor guy to drink the whole gallon of water at once. The rest of the students exploded in applaud or disgust, some of them stood up to get a better view. The cafeteria was anything but silent, except for one single table.

"What's the deal with you..." Max responded very slowly, ignoring all the clamor, with her sight still lowered. "... And trusting people?" She finally decided to cross her gaze with those hazel eyes. "I was pretty direct with you about him, more than I should have been. You still don't trust me with this, do you?"

The football players burst in laughter when their water prank got out of hand and two other students found themselves completely drained along with their books and sandwiches. "Stomp, stomp, stomp" was their joint chant when people, previously so excited about their joke, rushed away from the crazy bunch and crowded in a safe, dry space. The whole room whirled in fast steps, yells and loud warnings, but nothing changed between these two.

"It's not about trust, Max." Rachel's earring spun when she shook her head narrowing her eyes. Good intentions went to shit once again.

"Stooooooomp!" One of the football players yelled jumping on the table.

"It's all about trust, but don't worry, we will solve it pretty soon." Max winked at her, and relaxed finally. "Thank you for the cake." She added, watching how another bottle of water was spilled by the cheering jerks.

***

Chloe looked at the washing machine with pure disappointment. Joyce decided to do the laundry before she would hand over her work clothes. Her mother could do it for a reason though, since she hated when her underwear was sharing the same space as her daughter's shirts black from grease and
oil. Chloe gave up the argument that everything would be washed anyway, so what was the difference, trying just to sneak in her own stuff when Joyce wasn't looking. This time she was late. Unfortunately.

On the left side of the trembling machine, still working tremendously to clean all the family's dirt, Chloe noticed that David's glass cabinet was packed with pistols and revolvers, carefully lit to make them even more beautiful and shiny. Tempting. She took a step forward not sure if she should take one now, ask her step-father politely, or just follow Rachel's advice and put this idea to rest.

Which one to pick though? She had no experience with carrying a gun. It shouldn't be that hard though, since David the dumb was able to acquire this knowledge and she was a hella quick learner. The pistols looked more professional but they were probably more complicated. The revolvers seemed simple to handle, but contained only six bullets. She wondered how easy it was to pull the trigger in any of those, how easy it was to actually shoot somebody.

Probably too easy.

"You did good with this Dodge." Her step-father appeared by her side, scaring her to death. Chloe winced in surprise, trying to look as innocent as possible. She ignored the praise, forgetting about all the garage adventure altogether. David narrowed his eyes, proving he wasn't stupid after all. Even if Chloe tried to look innocent, it was obvious that the washing machine wasn't the main point of her interest here.

"Interested in my collection?" He asked simply.

"Maybe. You have some decent stuff here." Chloe's eyes were wandering from one weapon to another while she was admiring the deadly toys. She never expressed any interest in them before, mostly because it was one of David's things and everything that was associated with him she treated with disgust and an aversion, but damn, she was digging this stuff more and more now. Especially…

"This one?" David opened the cabinet and took the revolver Chloe was looking at. "Smith & Wesson, model 29, six-shooter, 44 millimeters, wooden grip, easy to handle, easy to clean. Classic." He opened the barrel with one skill move, double checked if the gun was unloaded and handed it to Chloe. It felt lighter than she expected. Her fingers grasped on the wooden grip slowly, almost shyly.

"Decent." She ignored most of the technical details, fascinated by the weapon "Can I borrow it?"

"Maybe…" David frowned, not sure how he was supposed to react. Her sudden interest in gun ownership was a pleasant surprise, but could be cursed with deadly consequences. "One day." He added, watching her playing with his favorite Magnum. "What do you need it for?"

Chloe didn't answer at first, looking at the shining barrel, brushing the trigger lightly. Easy to handle, said David, damn right it was. Not easy to hide though. Her girl would kill her with her bare hands, that was a given.

"Shoot some bottles at the junkyard, scare Rachel, personal protection, that kind of stuff." She murmured, still more occupied by the gun than the presence of her step-father.

"The gun range is a better and safer place if you want to learn how to use the weapons properly." He stated firmly. It almost sounded as an invitation to a man cave he shared with his army buddies. First cars, then this. Damn you, David.

She sighed loudly showing her reluctance but her chances of borrowing this beauty right here and now were slim from the get-go. Her step-father might not be a complete asshole, but his affection to
law and order was pretty famous in this household and she still hadn't celebrated her 21st birthday. So, a visit to a gun range with him or she wouldn't be able to lay her hands on a Smith & Wesson, model 29, anytime soon.

"Yeah, I guess. Maybe one day." She shrugged, pretending that she didn't care at all. "By the way, if I need your help with anything, are you available tonight? Like can I call you and shit?"

David returned the revolver to its place carefully, then wiped off the greasy finger marks with a special rug. He treated those toys like his kids almost. Hearing her questions, he frowned again.

"Yes, I am. Chloe… Are you in trouble?"

"No, why? Ah, nah. That's just…" Chloe really didn't want to elaborate on another of Max's wishes. Her friend really wanted to make sure that they could call David anytime, if the escapade would get them in trouble. She didn't specify what kind of trouble she had in mind and Chloe knew at least ten more people she was willing to call in that case but didn't ask questions. Not this time. "I was curious, that's it." She murmured.

"You would let me know if something bad was going on?" David closed the cabinet, double checked the padlock and put the keys back in his pocket. Chloe was watching his every move nervously.

"Of course, David. Sure thing." She responded, planning and strategizing, then looked at her own clothes and swore loudly to his disfavor. "I'm gonna do some laundry, do you have anything to add?"

***

Rachel passed the principal's office, slammed the crash bar, pushed the door hard and got outside with one graceful move. She didn't know why, but the talk with Max really played on her nerves today. Maybe it was because she had to spend Sunday morning on school grounds or maybe it was an unpleasant reminder that today might be filled with more secrets to uncover including the damn fucking enigmatic trip. Rachel really, truly hated surprises, especially planned by the girl who she had a terrible problem trusting. The only person on earth that was allowed to surprise her anytime and was welcomed to do it was probably still playing with a fuel filter or whatever serpentine belt, changing her hair color from blue to the dark grey of a gearhead.

The uneasy talk with Kate suddenly seemed like a nice change, something to look forward to, a variety. Her problems, even if deadly serious, weren't just a mixture of strange visions, witty responses and half asked questions. Damn you, Caulfield. Damn you and all your stupid warnings and meaningless retorts.

A cigarette was definitely in order and she really hoped that Kate was outside, preferably near the smoking area or not close to any guardian of clean lungs and fresh air. Rachel was in luck today. She spotted her at her favorite place, sitting on the bench by a tall birch, hiding from the eyes of others but still being noticed by Blackwell's habitants. Withdrawn and reserved, Kate was trying to focus on her book, but her appetite for literature was weak today and the written story was more a prop than an actual interest.

Rachel slowed down, wondering how to approach her, how to start this uneasy talk, still feeling
guilty for the situation. It was ridiculous to blame herself and, on top of everything, it felt different, quite unpredicted. Used to leaving her unsolved problems behind and moving forward, no prisoners taken, Rachel still felt remorseful, to her own surprise. Maybe her own failure, the harsh words and the loud argument with Chloe were playing a role in it, but last six months brought a huge transformation, twisting her own attitude, killing some parts of it and changing her as a person. Rachel wasn't sure if she liked this change.

"Hi, Kate. How are you today?" She started, trying not to intimidate to poor, shy girl and find the right tone and the proper words. Always good with people, Rachel knew this issue had to be discussed carefully, although she couldn't beat around the bush or sugarcoat it with sweet reassurance. Too many people promised Kate too many things. She might use a voice of reason. "I'm fine, thank you." Kate was about to finish the greeting sentence, but Rachel simply sat by her side, dragged out a pack of cigarettes along with a silver Zippo, and smiled softly. "Would you mind?" She asked softly, pointing at a fresh cig and asking for Kate's permission to light it up. The girl didn't object to either the vice or Rachel's presence. At least it didn't seem that way.

The lighter clicked with a soft metallic sound, the flame sizzled on the top of the tobacco roll. Surrounded by the grey smoke, Kate peered at her unsurely, closing her book. The surface of the wooden bench, once shiny and polished, was covered with carvings and graffiti, screaming with wishes, curses and profanities, creating a maze of high school scars. Her fingers caressed the timber wounds unconsciously, focusing on their shapes, not the meaning behind. "Zach + Dana", "You Bitch", "Make me famous", "Meet me at 5". All those writings had a meaning, contained some message and memory, but without any kind of insight, they were a sign of vandalism, a distraction from the previously beautiful surface. Kate had to know them all by heart by now.

Alright, how to start it. Rachel exhaled a weird circle of smoke, playing with her lighter and hoping that Kate wouldn't notice how dirty her nails were. It was hard to hide her fingers, while feeding her tobacco addiction. She had to try to build an atmosphere of trust and a space for secrets to be uncovered, and the best solution was to reveal a little bit about herself. Step by step, just to add some meaning to their personal wounds, simple mental carvings.

"I know we haven't been best buddies here and I was kinda a bitch sometimes, but I just want to tell you that if you need to talk to somebody, I'm here." She started, pacing the words carefully. "Thanks." Simple. Mild. Not inviting.

Kate's fingers passed some drawing of a dragon, a tag screaming 'WHORE!', a very sloppy Bigfoot logo, "Vortex Club SUX". She felt the serious talk coming. What would be the other reason for Rachel Amber to talk to her?

"I know a lot of people wanna help now and it's pretty annoying answering the same stupid questions over and over again. I know what you're going through though." Rachel sighed. "I've been there." She confessed, wondering if she hadn't pushed too much.

"You were?" She looked at her finally with fragile interest and a tad of hope, forgetting about the map of Blackwell's drama. Good, they both needed that hope to keep going.

"Yeah. I mean..." Rachel paused for a moment, wondering if she should go with a lie or the truth, and finally picked the latter. She didn't have much to hide in this matter anyway. "I've been through very dark times a few months ago. I dropped out of school, got involved with the wrong people, failed Chloe, failed myself." Damn, the memory dam had cracked, and the recalls starred to flood her quickly, forcing her to speak faster. She snapped the ash off the smoke. "Fell from the high horse,
you know. Yeah, drugs. You heard the gossip, I'm sure. Some of them are true. A slippery slope from a straight-A student to the lowest low and below. I was... Well, I thought I lost everything."

Kate listened in silence, not even blinking, contemplating every sentence, every confession, trying to find a resemblance with her own issue. Was it possible that Rachel Amber could give her legit advice and help her with this mess? The popular girl had a reputation of a troublemaker, but did she share her concerns and fears?

"How did you get back?" She asked softly.

"Chloe." The answer was fast and obvious. Chloe was Rachel's savior, full stop.

It wasn't the response that the girl expected. She didn't know what to presume in the first place, but the presented solution seemed unreachable, to put it mildly. Kate didn't have anybody who would be so dedicated and passionate to sacrifice everything just for her well-being. It was a sad and upsetting comprehension, but unfortunately truthful. She almost got annoyed that this blond beauty came to her just to brag about her wonderful relationship, but the only emotion she could express through a soft, calm gaze, was sorrow. Her fingers touched the most famous carving, the biggest and the most visible. 'Rachel Amber 4 ever'. Had Chloe done that?

"Ah." A spark of hope just got burnt down. "Well, you are the lucky one."

Rachel shifted unsteadily in her seat, covering her vacillation with another drag of smoke and wondering if she should hold Kate's hand in a reassuring gesture, but found herself caught between trying to be too friendly and too careful. Mentioning Chloe might've been a mistake, even if she really owed everything to her blue-haired girlfriend.

"Yeah, I'm the lucky one," she admitted, following the drawings and tags on the bench with her fingers still covered by flannel. "But I know how hard it can be. Chloe worked very hard to actually bring me back and I treated her like shit. It's hard to accept help sometimes."

"She had to love you very much."

Chloe's voice begging her to come back. Her soft words and unstoppable patience, when healing her spasms and seizures by a tight embrace. The understanding and forgiveness for every blunt and stupid accusation, half-truth and a curse. Chloe with her, close, battling all the doubts, loving her with all the dark secrets, defects and drawbacks. The only person who didn't want her perfect, who desired her despite the damages, who was there and would always be, even if she had been paid off with a handful of lies.

Memory can be a real bitch.

"Yeah, she did. She does. That's not the point." Rachel exhaled sharply. "Sometimes it's hard to accept help from somebody who loves you even more than from a stranger. More strings attached, it's getting more into a relationship thing than a rescue mission. Anyway, you... You are not alone, Kate, and there are people who care about you. We all want to help. Max wants to help." Sentences were short, fast, just like drawings on the bench, like perfectly aimed missiles. Missiles with good radiance though. "I'm always here if you want to talk. Even if we are not best friends. Even if I'm not Chloe. That may be actually a good thing." She winked playfully, trying to release some steam, drop the tension.

Overwhelmed and baffled, Kate was still trying to find the parallel between Rachel's situation and her own. Begging for help, surrounded by the dark was familiar, sounded similar, but she couldn't grasp the essence of it.
"How are your parents…" She stuttered, and then retracted instantly. "I'm sorry, I'm getting into your business."

Parents. Another painful piece of the puzzle, still not completely explained, still not discussed, still covered in the shadows of misunderstandings. Rachel wasn't even surprised that Kate went into that direction. She should've predicted it anyway.

"This whole talk is about getting into our business, but it's ok, really. My father… My parents…" Now it was her time to stutter, struggle with sharing without revealing too much. "They kicked me out. My... uh... relative made the same mistake, got hooked on drugs and they didn't want to go through the same shit again, got angry and I was hella stubborn. I mean, they tried to help but I refused, many times…" She really tried not to swear in Kate's presence and it was getting harder and harder. Chloe was truly a bad influence in that matter. "It was pretty bad, I was really an asshole. I did a lot of things that I'm not proud of." Rachel finished awkwardly, not sure how to describe the situation without getting into details that would confuse Kate even more. Honesty wasn't working in her favor today. Mentioning how terrible her parents reacted scared Kate even more, damn it.

"So, the drugs..." The girl was thinking about the other aspect of Rachel's past though. "It was your mistake, right? Your fault?"

Ah, the good ol' blame. That's what it was about.

"The guilt trip is part of the fun. Let me put it this way..." Rachel noticed her legs were trembling, like last time when she thought about the fix, about a quick and fast relief. "I did what I did because I had some unresolved stuff in the past, some things I couldn't work out on my own and was a coward to actually talk to Chloe about it. So, drugs were a… shortcut."

She came here to help Kate, not to dive into her own past, not that much, not that deep. Her personal guilt trip took a sharp turn, fully awake, reminding her of still being on the road, still not being fully honest to her own damn fucking girlfriend. The reminiscence of the numb state of losing her mind, surrendering every thought to the abyss of a mental nightfall, hit her hard again, first time in months.

"Shortcuts end badly. I know what you mean." She felt Kate's hand on her arm. Who was supporting who in this situation?

Rachel lifted her head, desperate to give her more insight, more advice, more help, instead of begging for such. Kate needed it more than she did. They had to stop talking about her, they had to stop it now, or it would end badly. She felt the small wave of anger crushing through her spine.

"If you feel guilty, that it... happened, you shouldn't." She stated firmly, more fiercely than planned. "The only thing that a girl should expect after a drunk night with the company of a few guys is a hangover. This is not your fault." A strong pause between every word in the last sentence was supposed to help her understand, to persuade. It worked a little bit.

"I could be more careful." Kate answered shyly. She didn't notice the rapid change in Rachel's sight, still not comfortable to confront the hazel eyes, reflect herself in them. Yet another reason to get furious. Rachel had to use all her inner strength to control herself. The smoke was halfway gone, time was flying fast.

"We all could be more careful, but we are not. The blame is not yours. Aim that gun at people who actually should be blamed for it."

"I don't know who." It was almost a whisper, a guilty fucking whisper. A soft, indistinct wind of words, but heartbreaking in their tranquility.
Rachel got angry again. Fully angry. She wanted to smash somebody's face, break their fucking jaw, punish somebody responsible for Kate's misery, for her own problems, for all the fucking evils of the world.

"Mark Jefferson?" She asked, but Kate shook her head firmly. "Nathan Prescott?" She tried again, and this time Kate didn't deny. Rachel narrowed her eyes. "Did you talk to him? Did anybody talk to him?"

"Wait, you want to confront him?" Kate's eyes grew bigger. She almost regretted this discussion and her own accusations. She moved a few inches away from her, scared by her rage and resoluteness.

"Somebody has to, don't you think? And this asshole…" Rachel almost crashed the cig's filter between her fingers. "Well, let's say I'm not charmed by him by any means. He knows that. And that's what you need friends for. Let us take care of it and don't worry, we won't let you get harmed. You are safe, Kate. Remember."

Safe. Kate tried to find the taste of this word, the meaning behind it. It was so natural a few weeks ago, now she had to think what Rachel had in mind. Those people, friends as they called themselves, they wanted to protect her. But what for?

"You would do it for me? Why?"

"Because no one should go through hell if they didn't deserve it. You didn't."

"Just... I don't know..." Rachel's eyes were burning with a pure fire. It wasn't a good sign. Kate didn't want any more trouble. "I don't want you to beat him up or anything."

"Oh, you mean… what happened to Victoria?" The blond fury smirked, grateful for a slight detour of thoughts. "That wasn't my idea, blame Chloe. She gets crazy when somebody is picking on me. And my girlfriend won't be involved in this, I promise." Every time she referred to Chloe as her girlfriend it made her feel proud and joyful. After three damn years it should be illegal to feel so damn blissful.

"Why was Victoria picking on you? You didn't do anything wrong… right?"

Rachel really didn't want to get into all the things she had done wrong. That wouldn't be uplifting. The discussion changed into a polite interrogation, question, answer, repeat, like shotgun shots. She noticed a drawing of a cute, little squirrel. Did Kate draw it?

"Because I'm gay?" It was getting easier every time, what a surprise. Rachel took another drag of smoke. "Using the victim's logic, it might even be my fault, since I wasn't very comfortable with it. You see where it leads? I can't blame myself though, it was on Victoria and I really didn't mean her any harm. But… Well, long story short, Chloe got pissed off and we all got a little bit wet. Don't ever try provoking her, it ends badly." She smirked at Kate knowingly, with tad of wit and humor. Her anger got stifled again, the mood got switched. The morning transformed into an afternoon, chilling the emotions down. She adjusted her jacket, pulling the collar up.

"I won't." Kate smiled back. They both sighed with relief. A fragile balance was finally found. "She seems very protective."

"She is. She really is." It was hard to miss the unique, special smile every time Rachel thought about Chloe. "Anyway, what's your plan for now?"

That was the first time somebody had asked Kate what she wanted. Everybody was just reassuring, comforting or feeling sorry for her. She didn't dare to think about the future, long or short term for
quite a while, but Rachel was right. Some kind of decisions had to be made, even if the idea of a
decision itself seemed petrifying.

Kate looked around for her own jacket, grateful for a few moments to form a sensible response. It
was getting colder indeed. Wrapping herself in the warm, soft fabric of the coat that her mother gifted
her, gave her the strength to actually say her biggest wish aloud.

"I'm thinking about getting back home." She sighed after another moment of silence. It sounded
immature, naïve and stupid. Running back, running away, leaving the horror to itself. Rachel would
probably laugh in her face.

"If you feel that's the right thing." Rachel wasn't laughing, not even close. "If it would make you
happy."

"Max says I should wait."

"Max says a lot of things..." Rachel finished her smoke and killed it with the heel of her shoe, not
bothered about littering or her friend's advice. "She wants to help though, but if you can't really deal
with it alone, maybe dropping out of college is not a bad thing. You can always come back after a
semester or two. I did. Listen, we all want you to stay, but if you need a break, it's fine. Or to find,
you know... professional help."

"Professional?" Kate blinked.

"Like a therapist or something. You really should talk to somebody, who isn't your dorm friend or an
ex-junkie. That might actually flourish with a better advice."

The idea of some stranger being bothered by her problem for pay seemed wrong from the get-go.
Kate, used to turning to divine power, to pray in moments of doubts, found this suggestion weird and
awkward. The stigma about getting that kind of help was also playing a significant role, but she
didn't have much choice. Rachel's words were sensible and rational, even if they both couldn't be
more different and have less of life experiences. Kate would prefer to tell her everything, way more
than to some professional, who would see her as an object or problem, not a person. Rachel Amber
treated her as an equal, and it made her feel a tad better. Finally.

"You are a great advisor so far." She confessed, hiding the book in her bag. Rachel briefly looked at
the title. "Joan of Arc, The warrior saint." Of course. Kate might've been questioning her faith, her
whole world, but old habits die hard.

"Thank you." Rachel got up, feeling that it was certainly time to catch up with the rest of her errands
before the hoodies and face paint would get involved. "I have to go now. Please text or call me if
you need to talk, alright?"

The girl smiled and nodded. She really smiled, even if the grimace was weak and her lips trembled.
Good radiance with a shotgun paid off. "Thank you. It got me thinking. Really. And... Rachel?"
She stopped her at the last moment. "Can I ask you a question?"

The whole conversation was about asking her questions, so yet another request shouldn't make a
difference, but this time something serious was coming in Rachel's direction. A cold shiver went
through her body while watching Kate struggling, really battling with her own thoughts.

"Sure." She agreed nonchalantly, recalling how to be an actress.

"What if..." Kate looked at her perfectly clean nails, trying to rephrase the query. "What would
Chloe do, if something like that... like to me... happened to you?"
"Chloe?" Rachel's eyes got darker.

There would be blood. Madness. Psychosis. Serious injury. Broken ribs, a heart ripped out. Knives involved. A stab. More than once. More blood. Maybe a gun. A bullet to the head. A fucking mayhem. No one would be able to stop her blue revenge, nor would Chloe care. Always protective, shielding, always by her side. If somebody touched Rachel, violated her…. If somebody dared and if she dared to tell Chloe, confess it somehow, it would end up in death.

She had to reload her mental shotgun.

Chloe could never know and Rachel would never tell. She was overprotective too. That was part of her problem.

"You don't want to know." She murmured, seeing Mark Jefferson appearing by the main school building. He looked at her with curiosity, smiled politely and then ran up the stairs. She watched him walking inside and seemed amused by her interest, even if her gaze wasn't friendly. Or maybe just because of it.

"You don't want to know." Rachel repeated very softly, still observing him closely.

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Steph bit her lip, looking at the white, creased envelope with her own name and address-her parents' address to be exact, not the dorms'. The mail got delivered a few weeks ago, her father had given it to her last weekend, but she still didn't dare to open and read it. It was pure coincidence that she found it today before throwing all her dirty clothes in the washing machine, forgetting that she had been carrying it for so many days. If she hadn't decided to search the pockets again it would become just another secret never uncovered, another mystery lost between her socks, pants, shirts and jackets.

The phone calls were rejected, the text messages unanswered, so a letter was the last resort, a last attempt to reach her, to explain. Steph didn't have time for any explanation, she moved on, she wanted to forget, even if longing to see this careful handwriting again. It was better to hide it, bury it in her locker somewhere, so she would be able to overlook its existence forever.

Done. She slammed the door harder and louder than expected, burying the letter between some books and notes. One day she would open it. One day when she wouldn't be busy. Like never.

Turning around, she noticed Mark Jefferson and Nathan just a few steps away. The teacher was asking him some questions with a demanding, angry whisper, almost pushing him against the wall. Young Prescott took a step back, then another until his back touched the cold surface of the students' lockers. He had no place to go, to run or hide. It would be a satisfying view if a member of the faculty wasn't involved. Steph frowned and walked closer, more willing to listen than to interfere.

"Don't lie to me." That was the only thing she could hear. The teacher spotted her and backed off immediately. Nathan gave her a murderous look. This whole interaction seemed strange, out of place and painfully familiar. Jefferson adjusted his jacket, getting back to his normal, charming self.

"Alright, very well." His voice was softer, but still touched with dander. "Remember about your objectives, Nathan. See you later. Today."

He walked off so close to Step that she could smell his expensive cologne. Still frowning, she peered at Nathan who desperately tried to calm himself down. His hands were shaking so much he almost
dropped his expensive camera. Steph knew she should go, should avoid any confrontation, especially now. This guy could be dangerous, especially when so unstable and off balance as she experienced first-hand a long time ago. It was too late tough.

"You!" He yelled at Steph, healing himself with rage. "It always has to be you! One day you will pay!"

"Fuck off, Nathan." She responded calmly. The only person who really was paying for the sins of the past was this one scumbag himself. She learned the uneasy art of patience finally, keeping her peace and not intimidated by him, not even scared. The past was a scar, itchy but healed. He wasn't a danger, nor was she. It was done.

Rachel showed up at the other end of the hallway, with an attempt to lurk into her own locker. She stopped and watched them with astonishment. Nathan looked at her, at Steph, then again at Rachel. Imprisoned between them, he growled, pulled out from an invisible trap and ran away to the boys' bathroom.

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Chloe hugged her close and tight, almost lifting her from the ground, sweeping her off her feet, mumbling birthday wishes. She smelled like car paint, mint shampoo and jasmine, reminding her of all the good times, plastic sabers and imaginary treasures. It was a good hug, even if Max could barely breathe. She enjoyed every second of it, finally being able to adore, to cherish moments like this. When they finally parted, her wide smile was still present. It felt so good to have her friend back, to have everything back.

"Damn, Mad Max, you are in a great mood today." The blue pirate cocked her head to the side with a devilish smirk. "What happened? Let me guess, you have some special celebration today."

"Don't kiss and tell." Max rose her eyebrow and grinned, knowing that Chloe loved to joke around, but blushing if a tease was answered bluntly. This time wasn't an exception.

The school parking lot was still lit by the scraps of daylight, but the nightfall was just around the corner, breathing with an already visible moon and a few stars. Steph was already late, deciding to fill up the tank of her new ride alone, and Rachel, regardless of an amount of face paint in the future, was preparing for tonight at the dorm, which always took a little bit longer than forever. The two previously estranged pirates had some time only to themselves. It didn't happen often.

"I have something for you." Chloe opened her car door and reached inside to grab a small bundle, creased and corrugated. Judging by the style of packaging, she prepared it by herself, not asking her girlfriend for help. "I know you said no presents, but damn it. Here you are." She handed it to Max and waited for the reaction with her eyes glowing.

The girl opened it slowly, rustling the paper, unfolding the surprise. Before she understood what she was looking at, Chloe hurried up with the explanation. "It's my father's camera. I want you to have it."

Silence. An adorable, enchanted moment of wonders.

"Thank you, Chloe. You really didn't have to. I really shouldn't accept it." Max turned the old polaroid in her hands. Some things would never change, some changed too much.
"Oh, you will accept it." Chloe murmured, with a smoke in her lips trying to find a lighter. "My father would be pissed at me that I'm not using it, so... It's in hella good hands now."

They hugged again, before the cigarette was lit, longer this time, more profoundly. This one small gift, the small sign of the past and maybe the future, was like the missing piece of a puzzle that finally fit in place.

They didn't talk much after, just enjoying each other's company. It was the first time when they didn't feel the need to fill the air with unnecessary award conversation. Not everything was fine, not everything had been discussed, but it didn't matter. Chloe smoked one, then another, tried to break the hush with a chit-chat spiced with memories, but Max just smiled, not really responding and it was fine. Finally fine. She tested her new treasure, snapping a few dark photos of her friend and the cars around, so familiar with its shapes and corners. She missed this camera, she missed it too much.

The loud purr of a car engine brought both of them back to reality. Steph parked her new white van by Chloe's truck almost at the same moment when Rachel appeared at the path from the dorms, looking goddamn stunning. The metal door opened and closed, somebody jumped onto the asphalt, soft steps tapped on the stairs. The four of them met in the middle, exchanging more hugs, greetings, wishes and jokes. It was time to start the night.

Max handed them the jar of the face paint. Steph took it over, but instead of smudging it on herself, turned to her own girlfriend and covered her cheeks with care and tenderness. The freckles got dark, darker and vanished under the war colors, but no paint would be able to cover how Max was illuminated by this touch. It was such an intimate moment, that Chloe and Rachel took a step back, leaving the couple as alone as possible, trying not to disturb as they tended to.

They should prepare themselves anyway.

"Baby, what the hell are you wearing?" Rachel hissed, when her girl opened the truck and handed her the dark hoodie.

"Your shirt?" Chloe looked at her with pure disbelief. It was painfully visible that this piece of clothing wasn't bought for her and by her. First of all, it was too small, and the bottom barely reached her belt, showing her belly button with every single move. Second, it way too short and even rolling up the sleeves didn't help much to hide it. Third, it was too tight and even if Rachel really appreciated the view of Chloe's cleavage it wasn't the right time and place to wear her jean favorite. Damn, she looked hot. Rachel took a deep breath.

"Take it off."

"That's an interesting concept, but maybe not in front of our friends?" Chloe smirked, suspecting that Rachel really liked what she was seeing. The little flames in those hazel eyes were flashing. It wasn't her plan to provoke her girl during the secret birthday trip, but this was certainly a nice side effect of not finishing the laundry in time. Chloe liked this shirt, even if it was too small, too short, too tight and not hers. Maybe because it was blue, or maybe because Rachel had owned it like forever.

"You are wearing one of my favorite shirts to a trip where we are supposed to get dirty from top to bottom." Rachel rolled her eyes, zipping up her hoodie. "Chloe, please."

"It smells like you." The answer was adorably simple.

"I smell like myself too. You can inhale as much as you want." Rachel winked and then urged her with another direct whisper. "Baby!"
Chloe smiled softly, very softly. She unzipped her girl's hoodie a little, pulled up the top of the first shirt with her finger and lurked on the second, covertly hidden underneath. Rachel always liked to wear two, like double armor.

"You're wearing my stuff too." She whispered, recognizing the white texture and black imprint of a skull. Chloe knew this shirt very well, she owned it like forever.

"Yes, but I'm not planning to get it dirty." The blond thief slipped out from her hand, covering her secret with a defensive gesture. Her girl was still smiling softly though, understanding, waiting. She didn't like to make Chloe wait. "And yeah, it smells like you too, happy?" The response was supposed to sound casual, nonchalant even, but the discomfort was way harder to hide than a second shirt.

"Yeah, happy." Chloe took a step closer, brushed off some non-existent dust from the blond hair, then touched the blue earring, stroked her cheek and tracing her jaw line, slowly lifted her chin just enough to kiss her lips. "Very happy." She murmured just before their breaths met.

The presence of their friends helped, directing the kiss into different ways, different roads. Rachel's hand on her girl's neck wasn't forcing to get closer, nor dragging or pulling, caressing the bare skin instead. Chloe didn't press herself onto her too hard, like in a panic that this moment would end soon, but held her gently, more for balance than from a desire. They didn't push for more, they didn't want more, not forcing to intensify the caress. They just wanted to kiss at this stupid, almost empty and filled with sinkholes parking lot.

"Alright guys." Steph had to step in. The black jar in her hand suggested it was their turn to change into secret ninja birthday warriors. "I see where it's going and it's not the direction we have planned for tonight."

"Sure, Steph." Chloe parted first, and passed the face paint to Rachel, since she had to change before getting anywhere near it. Thankfully she always had some spare clothes in her car, maybe not really clean, but that wasn't the priority anyway. The jean shirt got hung on the edge of the truck's bed. Chloe would fold it nicely later.

When she turned around, Rachel had gotten transformed from a blond saint to a hooded devil already, managing to keep her makeup intact. In other words, she still looked gorgeous, but way more edgy. Since she dressed up as a robber, it was pretty natural that another kiss would be stolen.

"So that's your new wheels?" Chloe whistled, finally noticing Steph's new van. "Sweet. A little bit Ted Bundy style, but it fits you well." She tapped the side of the car, checking the tires almost unconsciously. Her personal experience as a driver of a piece of junk wanted her to double check every single detail before she would get locked inside.

"Chloe wanted to say that she really appreciates your new purchase and she's offering a free car service anytime you need." Rachel explained nicely, not sure whether Steph was terrified by the comparison to the serial killer or was more than amused. The face paint was making everything so complicated.

"I figured." Gandalf the gay grinned and invited them inside of her new ride with a courteous gesture. "Shall we?"

It didn't take them much time to vanish inside the white van. The engine purred again, brand new tires rustled against the asphalt and off they drove leaving the parking lot even more empty and dark.

The jean shirt swayed in the cold night's wind, forgotten and left outside of Chloe's truck. It would
be hours till somebody would notice it, during yet another lonely walk around campus. Somebody, who would recognize it immediately, first struggling with the idea of stealing it, but then crossing the line, taking it fast and walking off quickly.

The shirt still smelled like Rachel. Or Chloe. Or both of them.

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"So, does anybody have any idea where we are going?" Chloe asked when they hit the main artery of Arcadia Bay, driving by the beach and passing all the neon lights of stores, restaurants and offices. The night was still young, but the street seemed empty, lacking pedestrians and other cars. The privileges of living in a small, forbidden town.

"According to the GPS it's hmm…” Steph lurked at the directions displayed on her phone. "The middle of nowhere."

Max smiled and looked up from her map, not offering any explanation even if her friends were striving for it. They would know soon enough.

"I kinda suspected that." Rachel sighed and moved slightly, trying to find a better position and a compromise between sitting on Chloe or sitting on the floor. Both options had some pros and cons though. The first one was tempting, but not comfortable in a shaking car, the other one, even if steadier, was lacking the previous attraction.

"Did you really?" Chloe murmured, when her arms were convincing Rachel to stay in place, hoodie to hoodie, face paint to face paint.

Steph tried to set up the Bluetooth and play some music from her phone, but the car, even if bought yesterday, was lacking this particular feature, so she had to deal with some strange connection device. Brilliant invention, too bad it didn't work. They would have to stick to the crackly radio then.

"You don't usually go to the city center dressed up as a robber. If that was Chloe's idea I would ask if there's anything illegal, but…” Rachel still didn't give up, trying to find a sneaky way to get any more information about the final destination.

"It's a little bit illegal." Max turned back from the passenger's seat to look at the other couple, nesting between boxes and cables in the bare back of the van. Steph's new beauty had only two seats so Chloe and Rachel had to sit on the cold, metal floor only with a few blankets, jackets and one fluffy coat. They didn't mind at all, since it felt more like camping in the stomach of a metal beast than an actual car ride. In other words, fun.

"To what extent?"

"Rach, you have to stop with this pre-law thing." Chloe sighed and made a decision for both of them, forcing her girlfriend to lay on her chest. It would be romantic, if the car didn't just smash on one of those speed bumps. Steph didn't really care about the city limit, speeding to forty despite the 20 miles per hour allowed. Chloe pulled Rachel close, trying to protect her head from being hit by anything around. "Max wouldn't get us in trouble, right?"

"She won't. I assure you." Steph stepped on the gas even harder, taking over another speed bump with a shaky grace. The car had got its first flying lesson. "Relax and enjoy the ride, it will take us a
good hour to get there. Sorry if the back is not super comfortable."

"We are used to not comfortable." Chloe responded, half-sitting half-lying between the rubble. Rachel secured their position a little bit using the backpacks, but they still had to hold each other tightly. "It's part of the deal."

The neon and street lights died at the horizon when they crossed the city limit driving into a dark forest road. The car was still shaking with metallic clangs and jangles even if the highway was way smoother. Chloe sniffed, wondering if Steph had really checked the suspension before paying an awful lot of cash for this thing. The white van would have to spend the next weekend in the Madsen's garage regardless.

The light buzzing of radio chatter completed the background with some indie songs no one ever heard of. It was the only sound to distract them when the lonely white van was eating up the black concrete, still shaking like a young kid before the first date.

Chloe reached for the flashlight, thinking about turning it on, but it would be pretty annoying for the driver, so she just played with the device for a while, keeping her hands busy.

"So, we have like sixty-three minutes to kill in complete darkness." Max sighed, breaking the silence.

"Good thing I'm not afraid of darkness." Rachel responded at once.

"So, what you are afraid of?" It was Chloe this time. She was aware of most of her girlfriend's fears, but Rachel could always surprise her discoursing something new. Her blunt confidence was riddled with many insecurities, including less or more ridiculous dreads.

"Well, moths. I hate them. I'm not a huge fan of swimming either. I almost drowned once."

"What do you mean you almost drowned?" Chloe tried to brush off an unruly blond lock from Rachel's face, but the van quaked again, and she almost poked her eye instead.

"When I was a kid I decided to run away from home and spend the whole night at Santa Monica beach." Rachel shrugged, leaning against her girl and avoiding any kind of accident along with the tender gestures. She really liked her hazel eyes. "It was getting nippy so I thought a swim would warm me up. I underestimated the power of the ocean and some guys had to drag me out. I was lucky enough to be saved by hippie surfers, what gives."

She could feel Chloe's warmth, her calm breath against her skin. The perfect girl got fully into protector mode. Damn, Rachel's life had been saved so many times by so many flukes and lucky circumstances that her biography would read like a fairy tale. Cats were known to have nine lives; how many did lionesses have?

"Why did you run away?" Max asked, not really hoping for an honest response, but to keep the conversation going.

"Long story and not pleasant, but I thought I would be better off than with my parents."

"Seems that it's a common occurrence." Max stated again, but this time Rachel didn't give any more insights, focusing on the laces of her hoodie and drowning, but this time in memories. Chloe was stroking her arm softly, uniting with her in the silence. She might not know everything about her girl's childhood, but it wasn't the right time to delve into it.

The radio crackled with a frequency seizure, changing from country to rock, then some advertisement. The station got lost for a moment. Steph fixed it with one click and the murmur of
indie songs filled the air again.

"Now you all have to share a secret, I can't be the only one." Rachel's tone changed also, triggered by the sudden change of music. Her voice sounded more playful, more challenging. Games were her forte after all.

"Just one, little mystery? Not two truths and a lie?"

"I'm tired of lying. So, who is brave enough? Max?" Rachel picked the first victim. "What about you? Any dirty scraps of the past you want to share?"

The birthday girl wandered among the mental archive of her secrets, trying to pick the one to share. She had too many already, some of them deeply hidden, some so terrifying that had to be left unspoken. Tonight was special though. Max felt the need to actually reveal something for the new, fresh start.

"It's not really dirty though, but since we uncovered some past stuff and talk about family issues, I might as well join the club." She replied, folding the map and putting it on her lap. Steph glanced at her with surprise, not used to that kind of answer. "When we moved to Seattle my parents almost got divorced. They were arguing a lot and my dad even moved out at some point. I was living between two apartments for almost two years. Crazy time."

Surprising revelations always had a special taste, creating a unique tension, changing the air, the perception of sound and time. Rachel could feel her girl's chest tightening in a surpassed exhale, her heartbeat tripping in the middle of a steady dance.

"That's why you never got back to me?" Chloe asked softly.

"Partly." Max nodded, knowing they would have to talk more about it later. Grateful that Rachel's witty game created the opportunity to start this conversation, she recalled how hard it was to actually mention it Chloe before. It always felt out of place and forced. Explaining shit wasn't her thing in general. "I didn't want to bother you with my stuff, since you had serious things to deal with. And I wouldn't have been a good partner to listen since I was busy with my own problems. Yeah, I know, I was an asshole. I had some hard times talking to people in general. The only thing that helped was taking photos, obsessively."

"Keep people frozen in time." It was Rachel's voice. The different tone seemed friendlier and more understanding for the first time ever. Nice change.

"Yeah, maybe." She agreed, not ready for any wise analysis. Steph touched her hand, still watching the road constantly but being fully aware of the tensed conversation.

The dark shattered shapes of trees were passing in the dim parade. Max was watching their uneven outlines, getting back to the troubling times when everything was so complicated yet so easy. The landscape became stagnant, locking them in place, even if they were moving fast.

"But your parents got back together, right?" Chloe was the only one who really wanted to dig deeper. She had to, feeling allergic to lies and lack of honesty. Her own relationship was infected with this shit, almost ruined and burnt down to ashes. She still could taste the debris of dishonesty. The fact that Max was hiding this from her and still insisted on calling her a friend added another shade of bitterness to the mix.

"They did, and they keep acting like nothing happened, but there is always something... underneath, like a scar or a stigma. It's weird and hard to explain."
Rachel nodded slowly. She knew exactly how it felt to see the scars and scratches on a perfect family's surface. Even if the origin of her problems was different, she could relate, find a common ground. It gave her a weird sense of peace, a possible solace in this odd connection of empathy. They were on the right path. Her and Max.

The car shook, while taking a rapid turn. Chloe also moved sharply, with vexation and impatience, still bothered by the revelations. She almost hit her head on the side board, but even a possible bruise didn't distract her from burrowing deeper.

"That's why you never came out?" She asked suddenly.

"Oh, seems that Steph was sharing stuff about me regardless. It's fine, baby, really." Max reassured her girlfriend with a slow caress of her hand. Steph looked embarrassed, not sure if it was her place to tell. "It's not a big secret anyway. Yeah, maybe that's why. I don't know, their marriage always seemed fragile. Speaking of my amazing girl, Steph, your turn."

Gandalf the gay scratched her cheek, smudging the black paint, then cursed when the steering wheel got grimed with the famous Blackfoot dye. As every driver of a new car she was overprotective about her ride and wanted it to be as perfect as the day it was bought. This stain was troubling tough, it might never fully come out from the leather cover.

"Alright, it will be illegal. And dark." She smirked, still trying to clean it up with her thumb.

"I like dark. Sounds like fun." Rachel encouraged her with a soft laugh, poking her girlfriend lightly. Chloe was still processing the news about Max's family, too bothered to pay attention to Steph's secrets or possible confessions. When she got hooked on something it was very hard to distract or direct her to another path of thoughts. One freaking stubborn pirate.

"I dated a girl who was way older than me," said Steph, still paying more attention to the road than her friends' confusion. "Five years older to be exact. The age difference wasn't a problem for us, but since I was sixteen it was like criminal activity."

The confession was shocking enough to even get Chloe's attention. Rachel's eyebrow flew high as much as her attentiveness. Max, who apparently heard a thing or two about it, also looked as stunned as the other couple, not expecting this particular thing to be revealed. Steph rarely discussed her previous relationship, excusing herself with painful memories and not sharing anything more than absolute necessary. Honesty was one thing, being completely open was another. Everybody in this van was guilty of the same sin.

The road became smoother, comfier, straight as an arrow. Some old truck, packed with the load of tree logs passed them with a loud horn. It could be a driver's greeting or just a signal of annoyance.

"Bullshit, that shouldn't be illegal." Chloe blurted out.

"But it was and it is." Steph shrugged. "Her parents learned about us, huge drama, somebody snitched to them and yeah, that's how it ended. Kris... She had to leave town and I've never heard from her since. Not that I miss her or anything. It was a long time ago." She looked at Max, not sure if it wasn't too much.

Her girlfriend never interrogated her about the past as much as she wanted to, but it didn't mean she wasn't interested in the details. Now seeing how concerning it was for Steph, she felt uncomfortable with her need for more. There were still some feelings under the skin, some undertones of grief and throbbing lack of conclusion. Whatever happened between Steph and her ex-girlfriend had to be painful as hell.
"Chill, I'm not freaking out, but you never told me much about her." Max murmured, forgetting about her own troubles for a moment. Steph came first after all.

"It didn't last long though, only a few months." The white van's driver exhaled deeply. "Don't be jealous."

"I'm curious, not jealous. The past is the past, right?"

They found their hands, grasped, uniting, promising to talk about it later. The surprises revealed so casually were always heavy with consequences. Max didn't want her girlfriend to feel doubtful or insecure about it, supporting in any way possible. Their relationship was built on support and trust in the first place.

"The past can bite you in the ass if you are not careful." Rachel Amber shared some verses of wisdom that no one needed. Her desire to always have the last word was annoying sometimes. Even if great with people she kept making a mistake once in a while.

"True." And here was Chloe again, always supporting her blond angel. The things that couples did. "An older girlfriend! Steph, you perv. At least you could get some vice, without forging a fake ID. Clever, Gingrich, clever."

Steph blinked a few times. She had never thought about her previous relationship that way and this idea never occurred nor had been conferred. Her previous girlfriend offered her a drink or two of course, same with weed, but it had been a few rare and special occasions, more to break the ice than rules.

"Yeah, but she was very responsible. She never got me drunk." She explained. "Much." Added quickly. They both had liked drinking red wine though. In bed. She still remembered the color of the sheets, their texture. Damn you, memories. "I had a hard time after this. Her family was up my ass going bat-shit crazy, I was even thinking about carrying a gun for my protection. Thinking, not carrying, though."

"Are they still around?" Rachel didn't want to sound like a future lawyer, but she got used to it too much, especially during interrogations.

If Max hoped for Chloe to react and tame her blond angel somehow, she was more than mistaken. Her friend shared the same curiosity and didn't see a single reason to stop the questions being asked. They all wanted more explanation, but for entirely different reasons.

"It's a small town so..." Steph hesitated, unsure of how much she should disclose. "Well, yeah, but we don't really cross paths very often. I think they still blame me for the whole thing, some of them at least. It's been years but she never came back home after that."

The sorrow and sadness in her voice was even more surprising that the news itself. Max looked at her with concern. So, her name was Kris. Damn, she had never heard it before. It was always the ex, the previous girl, 'you know who'.

"Where is she now?" Rachel kept going for everybody's sake. Her nosiness wasn't as annoying as a minute ago.

"Brazil." Steph decided to kill this topic before it would be too late. "So, what about you, Price? You are the last one here without sharing a dark secret."

Jumping to Chloe was the best solution to release some steam. She wouldn't share anything heavy, known for her shyness, implying some sexual innuendos and connotations instead. It would be a
great change for the atmosphere, but not for Rachel, who already breathed out loudly, sensing what was coming.

"How personal do you want me to be?" The blue pirate responded at once, with a blunt smile of confidence. As predicted, the tone of her voice bluntly suggested that she had one kind of secret in mind and it wasn't safe for work or for the ears of a minor. Fortunately, there were no underage teenagers here, especially since the youngest of them all just hit 18.

"Baby, please, do not share anything that is too personal and too…” Her girlfriend begged, regardless of her love for sultry puns.

"Oh, so I shouldn't tell them about the handcuffs?" Chloe bit her lip.

"Chloe!"

"Better handcuffs than duct tape." Max winked.

"Max!"

No one wanted to elaborate, and the radio station cracked with some religious monologue warning them to not go any further. The whole company laughed hysterically and couldn't stop even when Steph managed to get back to the previous tune.

"Here you are, dating a pirate." Rachel sighed, after a short round of cute wrestling with Chloe between the blankets and backpacks. It was damn risky, especially with the shaky van, but who could resist a punishment when the blue eyes were sparkling with such wit. Smartass. She smacked the blue arm lightly.

"I feel you, Rach, I really feel you. Anyway, Chloe, c'mon, share something."

"Your wish is my command." The former pirate choked and then rubbed her arm, thinking. "The problem is, I really don't have anything dark and mysterious to share. You probably know all my dirty secrets already."

"Bullshit." Steph laughed.

"You know that I was arrested for vandalism, that I got caught breaking into the school and how I got expelled, because it happened in front of your eyes." She poked her girlfriend's arm. Rachel, guilty as charged, laced her fingers around Chloe's, recalling the epic scene at the principal's office. The blue-haired trouble, not even a girlfriend then and still a cute strawberry blond rebel, decided to go down in flames just to save her. Adorable, unnecessary, cute, hot and stupid. She would never let Chloe do something so ridiculous now.

"She doesn't know that you were drinking heavily and it was getting serious." Max said softly.

Rachel's heart stopped, her breath became uneven. The metal floor got colder, her fingers grasped around Chloe's instinctively. She wanted to turn back to her girl, but was held tight, tighter than necessary. So tender and soft a second ago, Chloe was forcing her way to be left unseen. She didn't want to be looked at.

"You did?" A question was the only way to get to the bottom of this.

"Old times." Chloe's voice was hoarse. "You were on a vice too."

Rachel could feel her heartbeat, so calm and steady a second ago, now racing, speeding up, just like
their car in the darkness; it wasn't because of excitement or a pleasant amusement. Chloe was embarrassed, baffled and ashamed. It was an old secret, ancient stuff, not even deserving to be remembered, but she was still afraid of Rachel's reaction. The previous fears of not being worthy, of being just a junkyard hush-hush for the blond beauty made a slight comeback grinning their bloody teeth in the shadows.

"Oh, those times." Rachel gave up her fight, lying on her chest calmly, not asking for more. Not yet, anyway. They both listened to each other's breaths trying to find a single clue on how to read each other. The cuddle got infected by anticipation though.

Drowning in Santa Monica, parents getting a divorce, or a mysterious ex-girlfriend weren't as disturbing as this update. No one really knew what to say. Chloe learned from the best how to keep her guard up and was skilled with avoiding direct questions, always cracking a joke, especially when feeling intimidated. The concern was biting them, worsening every second. Somebody had to say something.

Alright, fine. Chloe sighed deeply.

"Yeah. Max visited, and she found me like, well... not in a good state at all. She kicked my ass and well, it helped. I kinda stopped after that and shit. It wasn't that big of a deal." She elaborated a bit, annoyed that this damn fact had been shared with everybody. Secret or not, she had avoided slipping into this dangerous spiral pretty successfully for the past six months, partly because of Rachel's dedication and care. There was no reason to discuss it, mention it or even recall it. Or so she was telling herself.

"It was a big deal, Chloe." Max was apparently on some war path right now, trying to reveal every single bit of scary truth and bring it to light. What had gotten into her today?

"It seems like it really was." Rachel tried to be calm. She really tried. "Baby, I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing for my own shit." Chloe scoffed. She couldn't share absolutely anything not getting into this victim fucking thing and her girl saying sorry over and over again. It was fucking draining. She wanted to know more? Fine. "Well, alright, I was close to reach the bottom, really. A few more weeks and it would be way worse. It's not really a secret, it was pretty obvious for my mom too. It was just a couple of weeks before, well before we started to fix things. I don't drink that much anymore, never got back to it. I just figured that's better to be numb than think about all that stuff, you know? And no, you don't have to worry." 

Rachel was worried. No, Rachel was scared to death. It wasn't even about the past, still troubling, still flashbacking and backfiring from time to time, but about the present and possible future. If something would go wrong, something would happen, Chloe would break, losing touch of reality. Her only support, her rock, her safe harbor she always could come back to, had its limits. Everybody had limits, it wasn't a shocking discovery, but she had no idea that the blue one was filled with liquor and empty bottles. This thought scared her more than every other possible secret yet to be exposed.

"Thank you, Max." Rachel's voice was trembling and she didn't even try to hide it, too stumped to care. "Thank you for being there with her."

"That's what friends are for..." Max turned back to them again, but this time sharing only a calm smile.

"To expose shit?" Chloe's chest rose in a heavy exhale. It costed her more than she wanted to admit. All the sleepless nights, all the fucking tears, unanswered messages, the world falling apart. Of course she was drinking. What else she was supposed to do?
"To keep you grounded when you need it."

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First the code. It was important to remember. A rapid buzz and he could open the metal gate. It was always pretty cold inside, always freezing. Nathan could feel the hairs on his neck standing up. He loved and hated this place at the same time.

The dark room.

It was a technological heaven, an icy home away from home, filled with cables, printers, negatives and dark memories. The place was built recently, equipped and prepared for every challenge, every artistic challenge they both would like to take. Him and his teacher, his master, his guide.

When he walked inside, Jefferson was already present, sitting on the leather couch and browsing the recent photos. Black and white remembrances of the latest projects, test shots, training negatives. The teacher seemed to be too absorbed to notice he was no longer alone, planning his new masterpiece, the new creation, the art. The most impactful art in the world, the secret transition.

It was Nathan's turn to be transitioned, fixed, changed. He loved and hated it at the same time.

"You came. I'm glad." Jefferson said, not even looking at Nathan. "Prepare yourself."

His master didn't make a single move, no single gesture was expressed. It wasn't necessary though. Nathan knew exactly what was expected of him. He bowed his head, sniffled silently and started to take off his jacket.

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The van had left the calm and peaceful highway turning into an uneven road, grassy, bumpy and muddy. Steph had to slow down, when the tires buckled in sludge, almost trapping them in a mucky surface. The car shook dangerously, prevailed on the right side, but she managed to keep it on the right path. Splashing through few muddy puddles, the car finally found a balance, accompanying with the desperate engine's whirl. The van wasn't shining white anymore, covered in war colors like everybody inside.

After the round of secrets none of them could keep the conversation going except a few scraps and pieces of chit-chat, short laughs and sultry jokes. The weird stiffness in the air appeared again, as high as the expectations, according to Max's surprise. The further they drove their curiosity grew as big as the tension.

"Speaking of secrets..." Rachel shifted a little against her girlfriend's body. "Chloe, it was bothering me for a while now, like literally. If you were a guy I would suspect that you're extremely happy you see me, but since you are not a guy I have to ask you…. What the hell is in your pants?"

"Hakuna Matata." Chloe grinned, but seeing an angry spark in Rachel's eye she pulled the bottom of her hoodie up showing the handle of Smith&Wesson, previously carefully hidden. "Don't worry, it's
unloaded. And I'm always happy to see you."

Of course she did; of course she had to fucking take it. Rachel really wanted to strangle her with her bare hands. If David had willingly given it to her, he would be garroted too. Repeatedly. Chloe protected herself with innocent puppy dog eyes, but failed terribly, meeting the hazel warning. This wasn't just fooling around. Chloe stole a weapon, a real gun. Damn you, fucking pirate.

Rachel had two options - to start a tantrum and explode with accusations and arguments or ignore it for now and try to talk to her girl privately. The first one was damn tempting, the second more reasonable. Being lenient wasn't one of her flaws, but she didn't want to start another shitstorm especially trapped in this shaken, metal can.

"Yeah, and you get a boner every time too?" She picked the latter, planning an argument for later and hoping to check personally if there were any bullets in this fat, obnoxious barrel.

"Maybe." Chloe winked, happy as a kid that avoided scolding.

Rachel pushed the gun lightly, so it wouldn't bother her and lied down on her girl again. She kept wondering how Chloe could even put her hands on this thing. Her step-father wasn't that dumb and the cabinet was always locked. Did she also steal his keys? How? So many damn questions.

"That sounded suspicious, Rachel." Steph brought her back to reality. "Any personal experiences with a guy's happiness to see you?"

Four gay girls discussing a male boner. What were the odds?

"I thought we were done with the round of secretive questions, but no, I don't have much personal experience. I attended high school, I still do, so you see things, I guess. That's enough to be aware of stuff, even if you are not interested in men at all." Rachel felt the need to tuck her hair behind the ear, but it was better not to attempt it with all this dye, paint and stuff. "And for your information, Chloe was my first." She added quickly, snuggling in her girl's arms even more.

"Yup, the V-card has been punched by a social delinquent." Chloe announced proudly, not even thinking if she just crossed the line.

"Chloe! For fuck's sake!"

Another round of wrestling was in order, but this time it ended quickly, since they both were aware of bruises and contusions caused by the stolen weapon, not very conveniently storaged in Chloe's pants. Rachel was angry for like fifteen seconds and then got tickled once, and again and somebody kissed her slowly, so slowly that she melted like freaking butter on a Texas toast.

Fuck this face paint, it tasted like shit.

"You're bullshitting me, Rachel." Steph giggled, still looking at the road even if she was very tempted to actually see Amber's reaction. "No experience at all? Really?"

It was hella annoying that everybody was questioning her every time she revealed something really truthful. Still balancing between irritation and pure laughter, she freed herself from the hungry blue cuddle and opened her arms in a helpless gesture.

"What can I say? I'm a hella good actress."

"A spectacular one." Steph agreed, still amused by the information. Rachel really wanted to kill her. It was the third murder she had planned today. Why was everybody so interested in her virginity? It
wasn't that big of a deal. "Congratulations, Price!" Gandalf the gay couldn't shut up. "So, Chloe was your first and the only one?"

"The one and only." The blue lie held her closer, not even blinking, when expressing her dishonesty. She was willing to lie more, damn it. Chloe Price would do everything to assure them that Rachel Amber was only hers and no one else even touched her, but her girlfriend put a finger on her lips, asking not to. There was no reason to delve deeper into this blunt, dumb story that they both really wanted to believe in, despite the facts.

Chloe wasn't a good liar anyway. Good thing she was pretty.

"You're talking like getting my v-card was somehow a lifetime achievement." She poked the blue chest and then seeing a happy grin, she scoffed again. "I'm not a PlayStation trophy! And by the way, too bad you can't say the same thing."

"Wait, what?" Max was about to open a bottle of water and almost dropped the plastic cap on the van's floor.

"Elliot, the creep." Rachel filled her in, generous with sarcasm. "My girlfriend was dating freaking Elliot Rodgers of Blackwell!"

Chloe groaned loudly and hid her face in her hands, regardless of the hoodies, face paint and everything else. Her girl and her friend discussing the worst part of her sexual experiences was the worst nightmare of them all. She was bragging about Rachel’s virginity, she gotta get got. Suffer, you amazing monster with a stolen gun.

"You slept with Elliot?" Max almost choked on a sip of water. "They guy who hit me in kindergarten because I stole his little choo-choo?"

"Well, apparently, he stole Chloe's choo-choo too." If irony could burn things down, the whole van would be standing in flames. Max choked again, coughing desperately and Steph laughed so hard she almost drove them into a ditch.

"Rachel!" Chloe's embarrassment exploded in a short fierce gasp. "I was fucking fourteen! And it was consensual!"

Damn, her ears turned red and started to itch. Chloe was never so grateful for face paint as in this very moment. Rachel was still damn jealous about the ancient past, still not being able to forget about a few moments of desperation, when she tried to find somebody, to feel something. Chloe knew they shouldn't go that far, not with Elliot at least, it had felt wrong from the start but she was so young, so stupid and lonely. She didn't expect to meet the love of her life only months later.

"I would still call it an act of thievery since you weren't emotionally involved and devastated after your father's death." Rachel kept going, still too damn stubborn to stop. "And he was stalking you later!"

"You were stalking me too!" Chloe blurted, hoping it would distract her blond devil.

"Not to that extent and I've never broken into your house to brag about morals when you were dating him! Yes, he did it!" Rachel looked at Steph and Max, both extremely amused. "He fucking tried to lock down my girlfriend in my father's office! In the DA's office, mind you. He wasn't super smart."

Chloe was trying to stop her somehow, wondering if there were any classes or workshops she would be able to take in the future. Like 'How to shut up your girlfriend 101'. Usually she would just kiss her hard, or even get into her pants, that was one way to do it, but the current circumstances weren't
favorable for such intense action. Plus, Rachel wouldn't let her. Damn it.

"Oh, I didn't know that." Max got really into this uncovering secret shit. She finally was able to sip on her water without spilling it everywhere. "That sounds interesting."

"It wasn't interesting by any means." Rachel hissed, but still enlarging the info. "I was in the hospital, half-dead and my baby had to deal with this creep by herself. I still can't believe I wasn't there to back her up. Anyway, Chloe called the police and yeah, it was the farewell for Elliot in general. I didn't have to see his face again and he is hella lucky about it."

"That's why he got expelled!" Steph finally was able to put some pieces together. "And she said she doesn't have any secrets! I mean I knew you were hanging out with him for a while, but you didn't look like a couple. Chloe Price, the biggest gay punk ass in Arcadia Bay had a boyfriend."

Chloe Price looked terrified. She had never referred to Elliot as her boyfriend and never made any attempt to do so. Steph was the first and the only person who actually said it. It was disgusting.

"And Rachel freaking Amber lost her virginity to her first girlfriend." She stated proudly. Yes, it was stupid. Yes, it didn't matter. Yes, she was damn happy about it. Take that, Rachel freaking Amber.

Her girlfriend didn't lose her wit.

"It would be hard to lose it to a second girlfriend, since I had only one and I'm not planning to change it anytime soon, never actually, thank you."

"Your obsession about Price is showing, Rach." Gandalf the gay still couldn't believe her own ears. That was why Rachel was on could nine every time she talked about Chloe just after they started dating. That explained everything.

"Look who's talking now!" Rachel was pretty good with people, especially with shutting them up. No workshops were necessary. "Steph Gingrich, an armed pervert who was dating older girls."

"It wasn't as perverse as you might think. And Max…"

"And Max will show you a secret in a second." The birthday girl twisted the cup, closing the bottle. "We're here."

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Victoria looked at her watch, then at the window, then at the watch again. It was already freaking late. She tried to sort everything as much as possible, but all of Blackwell's paperwork was messy and Mrs. McMullen's handwriting was hard to read. She really had spent the whole day here, not even taking a decent break, organizing everything as carefully as possible. How had this school been functioning without her?

"Is there anything I can do for you today, Mr. Wells?" She asked politely, hoping to be dismissed. Getting back to her dorm room wasn't necessarily a thought that made her excited, but she was so done with this office bullshit.

He looked up from another budget sheet he had to go through today, torn between the keynote presentations and the school board's financing reports. His face, painted with blunt confusion was red
and swollen, his breath sharp and reeking. It would be convenient to blame the work, the infinite passage of papers and notes, but Wells stopped lying to himself months ago and the bottle of cognac was at fault here, not the excel diagrams.

"Actually, yes." He crushed Victoria's hopes with one short sentence. "If you can go through the files and put them together in the folders, just like that. I also need those sheets to be typed in the excel file. Oh..." Wells also noticed how late it got. "Would you be comfortable if I leave you alone in my office for a short while? I have to pick up my kid from soccer training."

Victoria doubted that he had any kids whatsoever, especially ones that would be into any kind of sports, but she smiled politely and nodded.

"Not a problem, Mr. Wells. I will be more than comfortable."

The principal got up fast, took his coat from the hanger and murmuring a quick goodbye, vanished behind the heavy, wooden door. Victoria heavily suspected that the only kid he cared about was a bottle of Scotch and the soccer training included a glass, some ice and a bar nearby, but she didn't say a word, pretty damn content with his decision.

She had waited for this moment the whole fucking week.

There was no time to lose. She had maybe an hour or less. Somebody could walk here in any moment and report it later. Her breath grew heavier when she opened the metal cabinet looking through the student's files. Technically it wasn't illegal, since she was allowed to spend time in the office, but practically if somebody caught her, she would be in serious trouble. Suspended, expelled even, who knew what kind of punishment would be persuaded for such an invasion of privacy. She got invaded too, and this was her payoff. It wasn't an easy stress-free mission though, and while looking through the printed names Victoria wasn't sure if she hadn't gone too far.

Finding Nathan's file was surprisingly easy. It wasn't even in alphabetical order but at the very beginning. The folder was thick, filled with statements, medical reports and notes about his father. It would take the whole day to go through it. Damn, maybe another time then. She really should learn something more about her troubling friend, but there were too many secrets and too little time.

Chloe Price. A file as big as Nathan's. Victoria opened it greedily. Police reports, arrests, warrants. Incriminating but not surprising. The blue trash had been holding the reputation of a bad girl for years. Her becoming a nun would be a bigger surprise. So, Rachel Amber then, the obvious choice.

Victoria took out the file from the drawer and opened it on Wells' desk, turning the pages impatiently. Scholarship, best drama actress, head cheerleader, spelling contest winner, American history contest winner, Shakespeare contest winner. Christ, this bitch was really some kind of overachiever. The school kept even the newspapers' reviews about some old play Rachel was in, what a fucking dedication.

Amber's folder wasn't as extensive as her girlfriend's but Victoria was slowly losing her patience. Security reports, some notes about the drug addiction. Well, she knew that already. Interesting, but not impeaching since the whole school was aware of Rachel's shit. The queen was a junkie, slipped down hard and hit fucking rock bottom. Old news. Frank Bowers was mentioned to be of her acquaintances. A business partner probably, or the candy deliverer. Of course, she had to hang out with him, the whole school knew Bowers the beans fart, as the whole school was buying.

When she lost her hopes to find anything vaguely significant, she got to the last section of the folder. Victoria looked at a few letters, dated back in 2010, almost four years ago when Amber was still a newcomer in Blackwell. History, but sometimes history might be more interesting that the present.
Most of them were signed by Rachel's father, James Amber. A formal correspondence was a very unique way to communicate with the school. Parents usually prefer phone calls or simply walking in. It had to be important. Good. Victoria hoped it was critical and sinister at the same time.

She sat in the principal's chair, very comfy by the way, and started reading.

"… Forbidding to provide any information whatsoever regarding my daughter Rachel Dawn Amber to Sera Gearhardt or her formal representatives, Kosterman & Shapiro, Family Law LLC, despite their supposed lawful claim to obtain such information."

Victoria raised her head, thinking intensively. Some lawyers really wanted to know more about Rachel. Some woman was obsessed with her to the point that her father had to step in, and it was way before this dyke got into drugs.

She got back to the papers, feeling a shiver of excitement. Something new, something she had no idea about.

"Sera Gearhardt cannot know about any whereabouts of Rachel Amber, or formal proceedings and legal action will be taken against Blackwell Academy and I will hold you personally responsible for such negligence." She was reading it aloud with a fast, quiet whisper, as always when she tried to focus. It helped. She licked her lips. "Miss Gearhardt is indeed a shady individual with a connection to dangerous criminals…" Some names were listed below. Victoria didn't recognize most of them, but took a photo of this part, just in case. Frank Bowers was listed too. What the hell? "… Criminals and offenders against whom the investigation is being conducted. Her relations with my daughter won't be discussed further and I sincerely hope the school will respect my decision as the lawful guardian of my daughter."

Victoria stopped for a moment, narrowing her eyes. "Relations?" She repeated, not sure how to interpret this part. Was this woman involved with the Ambers? Why did she want to know more about Rachel? This blond asshole was just a kid then, not tangled with anything illegal, not to that extent. If she was, she would be expelled in a minute, with a DA father or not.

She went through the rest of the letters, most of them contained the same information, repeated constantly, but with a slightly different tone. Typical lawyer's work. It seemed like the school board or whoever was about to make a decision in this case, wasn't sure if they should follow James Amber's orders. The mysterious woman's name appeared in those documents over and over again. Interesting. Very interesting.

"Sera Gearhardt cannot meet Rachel under any circumstances and regardless of any desperate persuasion she would pressure. This is critical to my daughter's well-being." That was how the last letter had ended. Just a warning, or a desperate plea. James Amber seemed really distressed.

Victoria put all the papers together, ready to hide the file back in the cabinet, still wondering about her new discovery.

"Who the fuck is Sera Gearhardt?" She whispered to herself.

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"You did good." That was the only thing he heard when he was dressing up, slowly collecting all his clothes from the floor.
Nathan nodded slowly, lurking at the new photos. Yes, he really looked like a conqueror in them, a warrior, a true champion. It helped, really helped to become the man he wanted to be, fulfill the expectations, change. He needed a change desperately, strived for it, remembering about the legacy, the name, his father's teachings. The photos helped. He was assured it was the right path, the right way.

Who cared if he was completely naked when they were taken.

Jefferson never liked watching him dressing up. It was the dirty part of the job, the less clean, less sacred. Nathan never knew how to react to it. He felt relieved it was over, content it did happen and betrayed by the lack of interest or consolation. Jefferson didn't look at him even once since they had finished.

"You did good." He repeated, when young Prescott slowly walked to the armed gate. "I'm proud of you, Nathan."

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"Booya!" Chloe, previously hidden in the shadows, jumped on her almost knocking her down. Rachel closed her eyes, and smacked her arm lightly. It was the third time today when her girl tried to play scary punk ghost and succeeded in scaring her to death. Amazing. A heart attack was exactly what she really needed today. That would be a real fucking surprise.

"Chloe, one more time, and I swear…" She warned, but then giggled, when the blue ghost attacked her with tickles. "Baby, stop!" Rachel extorted, bursting in laughter and trying to run away. Chloe appreciated the effort, but she would never let her go so easily, claiming her ownership with a forced hug. They almost fell on their faces and erupted in glee again avoiding the dark muddy ditches.

They parked a good mile away and Max ordered them to walk through those gloomy, unknown woods, forcing them to wade through colonies of bugs, thick bushes and oceans of fallen leaves. They tripped many times, getting dirty from top to bottom, holding onto branches and each other, first in tremendous humor, then just tired of wading through the Oregon jungle. Max was silencing them nervously the further they went, killing every sign of delight. The fun part of the trip was almost gone, everybody just wanted to get to the destination, wherever it might be.

"Max, I love you with my whole heart, but why do we have to go through these freaking bushes? Couldn't you ask me to park closer?" Steph whined, following her girlfriend step by step. The fact that she was carrying a pretty heavy backpack was butchering her own enjoyment and strive for adventure even faster.

"It would be troubling if we met anybody." Max looked at her phone one more time, then lit up her map just to check the directions. She had forbidden them all to use any kind of flashlights, wincing even when Rachel or Chloe grabbed a cigarette. He friends followed her advice, but their patience had a limit, and she was dangerously close to reaching it.

"Met anybody? Great." Steph sighed and smashed a mosquito that was about to bite her neck. "I really hope we don't have to run back to the car through all this shit."

Running back was a possibility, but Max didn't even want to think about it. Everything should be fine, though. She planned it carefully. Her good mood was almost gone, replaced by the nervous
thrill and anxiety. She wasn’t used to leadership, and the group, even if formed from friends still listening to her requests, was an unruly bunch. It was only a matter of time for one of them to do something stupid. She didn't want to play favorites but it was damn obvious who would ruin the whole operation first.

"I thought we agreed you're not gonna bring a gun with you." Rachel whispered, noticing that the other couple was a few steps away and she could finally ask Chloe some questions. She wasn't even angry about the blue disobedience. Concern was a better word.

Damn mosquitos were eating them both alive.

"No, you said no guns." Chloe killed one of those assholes and shrugged, trying to find a lighter in her hoodie's pocket. A freshly unpacked cigarette was dangling between her lips. Her face, covered in black was hiding every sign of distress and the blue eyes were way more shimmering than ever before. "We never agreed on anything. And don't worry, I told you it's unloaded." She took another step, ready to end this conversation and light up some tobacco, but Rachel stopped her once again.

"Baby, I don't want you to play with..."

"Fire?" A spark changed into a flame. Chloe inhaled deeply on the first drag of smoke. "Too fucking late. Max wouldn't ask me if it wasn't serious. I trust her. You should too." She wanted to keep going, but looked at Rachel who awkwardly still stood in place, wiping her hands in the sides of her pants. Everything was so dirty from filth, mud and sludge that it wouldn't make a difference if she did it Chloe style.

The blue flare sighed. This dark forest wasn't the perfect place for questions and answers, not to mention any serious conversation, but seeing Rachel so bothered by it was too hard to ignore.

"Was it true about the drinking thing?" Her blond angel asked, looking down at her own shoes. She wasn't looking very angelic at the moment though.

"Yes, it was and I don't really want to talk about it. Not when I carry a gun." Chloe tapped the handle of Smith&Wesson with a cocky smile. Being the John Wayne of the group really made her day, even if she didn't pack a single bullet and the weapon was basically useless.

"Unloaded gun." Rachel pointed out and looked at her shyly. "Can we talk about it later?"

Chloe lifted her head, breathing out a cloud of smoke, taking another drag just after and cursing Max's random moment of unnecessary honesty.

"There is nothing to talk about. I was just hella lost without you. Big deal. You knew that already." She shrugged, gesturing the way forward and sensing a possible drama. This whole fucking trip started to play on her nerves. She really wanted to keep going, be done with those demands, enigmas, darkness and whatever else. Max and Steph were way too far ahead though, and it was about time to catch up with them.

Rachel didn't make any attempt to move at first, looking at her dirty hands, shoes, hands again, and then rushed towards her to kiss her slowly, smudging the face paint even more. It was short and supposed to be sweet, but Chloe didn't respond as eager as usual. Bad sign. Chloe always responded.

"Please, baby. Don't be mad." She pleaded and got what she needed, as always, when one lost girl was kissing the other lost one.

It was Rachel Amber's way to say sorry for every single bottle of scotch drank when she wasn't around. Rachel Amber's way to say she would never leave her girlfriend again or let her down, even
if they both would wear hoodies in the middle of a dark, murky jungle. Rachel Amber's way to fix things that weren't fixable. The kiss was bitter from the smoke and sorrow, smelled like metal dust with undertones of car grease and lost chances.

"What was that for?" Chloe frowned.

"Do I need to have a reason?" She whispered and started to walk towards Steph and Max, who apparently were still arguing above the lit-up map and pointing in different directions. Chloe followed them after a moment of hesitation, still keeping her hand on the gun's grip.

"Max, are you sure about what you are doing?" She heard Steph's concerned whisper. They all expected this evening to be unique but the constant fight with the flying parasites, surrounded by tall, dark trees in the middle of fucking nowhere was getting the best of everybody.

"Yes baby, I know exactly what I'm doing."

"More insight please?" Max's girlfriend was slowly losing her patience, to the point that she didn't even care who could listen to their conversation. "You know I don't mind you being all mysterious and it's pretty hot, but this is going a little bit too far."

Rachel walked a little bit closer, almost tripping over a tree root. Chloe caught her in the very last minute and held a tad longer, kissing the damn hoodie, since the blond hair wasn't in her reach. It was Chloe Price's way of saying she was sorry too. Chloe Price's way of saying she loved her more than anything in this world, bottle of Scotch or not, and nothing needed fixing. And yeah, the gun thing was unfortunate, but Chloe Price would explain everything later, especially if naked and after a hot, nice shower.

"Everything will be pretty clear just in a few minutes, really." Max looked at her friends, turning on a small flashlight that illuminated her face for a second. "I know it might be dangerous, but it's such a relief to finally… reveal stuff, finish some things and start anew. I love you, Steph. Thank you for trusting me."

"I love you too."

No one said a thing for the next fifteen minutes. They were still stumbling between the bushes, and roots, hoping not to stomp on an anthill or sink into some weird hole. The weird sound of struggle mixed with the night cracks of forest silence was getting annoying, then scary, then forcing them to regret this idea whatsoever. They all could just drink some illegal beer, having fun, watch some movies, instead of drowning in darkness.

The forest ended rapidly. Surrounded by the pines, oaks and bushes and fighting with mosquitos, suddenly they found themselves in an open space, getting into a different world, free from the previous defects. Chloe finished her smoke and took a few steps ahead looking at an old barn, surrounded by a simple wooden fence.

"Is that it?" She asked, pointing at the building.

Max nodded, sighing with relief. She folded the map, hid the phone in her pocket but still didn't make a single attempt to move forward. Everybody crowded around her by the border of the woods, looking at the silent, mysterious building. The crickets were playing their song nearby, adding a special music theme to this tense moment.

Steph shivered. There was something weird about this place. Something not welcoming.

Since they went so far, it would be silly just to get back without a single try. They slowly started to
walk through the dead grass, and after a dozen steps an unused muddy road was found so the journey got more steady and comfortable. That should be a relief, but even Chloe looked unsure, usually the first one to explore and easily challenged to put herself in trouble. Her hand found Rachel's when they were getting closer, step by step, still looking at the dark shape of the barn, sharply cut off from the dark blue sky.

The supposed secret was getting closer, ready to share, ready to eat them inside.

"You know we are trespassing, right?" Rachel broke the silence when they reached the fence. The old wooden boards were almost rotten. No renovation was made in the last decade or longer.

"I told you it's a little bit illegal."

Chloe jumped over the fence, Max leaned over to sneak between the boards. Rachel sighed and just walked around, noticing a passage between the wooden planks. Steph followed her, still unsure if she should keep her flashlight off. Their eyes had gotten used to the darkness already and the night was pretty bright after all.

The crickets got louder.

"Who owns this place?" Rachel asked when they finally stopped in front of the old building. "You really want to go inside that barn?"

"That's the plan." Max looked damn happy. She had never looked so content before. It almost seemed crazy, regarding the circumstances and the common mood. "Be careful though. We don't know who can… be here."

Chloe reached for a gun. A childish gesture, but feeling the oiled metal gave her some peace. Rachel stopped her just before she took it out. Trespassing was one thing, being an armed stranger yet another. This time it was no discussion.

"I really hope you're not gonna aim this thing at anybody who has a full right to be here." Steph murmured, looking up and noticing how damaged the roof was. Some of the planks and boards were nailed properly, or just got torn down by the weather and wind, now bursting in a serenade of clangs and wooden clashes with every single gust.

Nothing about this barn was making them go inside. Absolutely fucking nothing.

"This place looks hella abandoned to me anyway." Chloe tried to cover her nervousness with fake confidence. "Let's check it out."

That was probably the worst idea ever. Rachel looked at her terrified. Birthday wish or not, she didn't really want to explore this place. Now they all understood why Max had asked for a gun. Why she had picked this place was beyond them though.

"There is a padlock on the door." Rachel pointed with relief when they reached the wooden gate. Abandoned or not, the barn wasn't accessible. Well, yet another disappointment in life. She was pretty ready to turn around and find the way back to the car.

"Do you want me to try to pick the lock?" Chloe's words ruined the perfect plan.

"You don't know how to pick a lock, baby."

"Actually, I do." The blue confidence put her hands in her hoodie and sniffed. "My friend taught me. My former friend." She added quickly, walking to the padlock and leaving her girlfriend behind.
Her girl didn't have time for a discussion, trying to find any kind of tool that would help her get in. Chloe's nervousness made her an asshole sometimes, and even if Rachel was used to it, it wasn't nice.

A wooden board cracked. Fucking crickets kept fucking singing.

"Your former friend? Why do you always have to befriend thieves?" Rachel narrowed her eyes again. The hazel glare changed into two little cracks between the dark smudges of her face.

"It doesn't matter. Do you have any tool I can use?" Damn hoodies, it was so easy for her girlfriend to hide herself from a questioning gaze.

"Only a nail file. Who?"

"You can leave former friends behind." Max stepped between them before another furtive got uncovered and waved at the whole group to follow her. "There is a top-secret passage anyway."

They didn't even want to ask how she knew all those things, still grasped in the mystery, weird excitement and concern. Max led them to the side wall of the building then walked to one of the boards and pulled lightly. It moved a little bit, still locked between others but there was a possible way in for sure. Chloe rushed to help her and it was very much appreciated. The two pirates fought with the panel for a moment, and then pushed it aside with a loud crash. The barn was finally accessible, open, they could walk in.

And they did.

The smell of old, wet wood mixed with rotten hay filled their lungs. The building was empty, excluding a few old engines and half of a rusted tractor parked by the opposite wall. No sign of a human presence or any living soul whatsoever. Chloe looked around, opened her arms and looked at Max with concern.

"Alright, so what's the big secret?" She asked, grateful she didn't have to whisper anymore. "Looks like a smelly, old barn to me."

Steph dropped her backpack with a sigh of relief. It was damn heavy and she wouldn't mind a break. Getting to an abandoned building was an exciting idea but she could think about a dozen more in the Oregon state that would be worth exploring. This barn seemed pointless. Max was still very tense and focused though.

"Can you turn on the searchlights now? Please?" She asked.

Step, grateful for her freeing her arms from the heavy lift, started to unpack the prepared kit with Chloe's eager help. Rachel watched them skeptically, trying to find one logical reason why this place should be lit with strong, professional spotlights. She found a pack of cigarettes, got one and kept herself busy feeding on a smoke.

It didn't take them long to actually turn on the strong beams and the whole space got filled with an extremely bright light.

"Happy birthday, Max.\" Chloe smirked.

It almost felt like a theater stage. Everybody squinted their eyes for a moment, used to the darkness, and then looked at each other. They looked pathetic in their cheap disguise, now blatantly visible. Chloe grinned, Steph smirked, Rachel shook her head.
"Thank you. It's supposed to be somewhere here." Max was looking at the floor, searching for something, probing the surface. Her excitement was as bright as the lamps Chloe and Steph were holding.

Finally, she found what she wanted. "Oh, here you go. Can you help me with this door?"

"Sure. Rachel, can you please hold it for a moment and try not to blind us with it?" Chloe passed her the huge, heavy reflector, tucked the gun deeper in her pants and then walked to Max, who was patiently waiting for help. The wooded door in the boarded floor looked old, as if no one had used it for centuries, but whatever pleased the pirate. It was her birthday after all.

It was heavy. The crowbar was extremely helpful. Rachel was watching them still trying to smoke, holding the damn light and her irritation was winning over her curiosity. Why were they even here? Chloe didn't look as concerned, but their gazes crossed a few times and they both found a common understanding and worry. It took them a good minute of sniffing and jerking to raise the gate and then smashing it to the other side with a loud noise.

Max froze.

"Oh god." She whispered.

"What?" Chloe frowned, taking the searchlight out of Rachel's hands, panting heavily after the exertion. "There's nothing here."

The door that had cost them that much sweat and effort lied down on the other side, exposing the secret of the barn's cellar. The former barn cellar though, was not in use for decades, since it was filled with dust, sand, some rocks and rubble. Whoever had built it, decided to bury it a long time ago, probably for security purposes. The owner didn't want this cellar to be a deep hole in the ground, especially if the barn wasn't used at all, which was more than understandable. The wooden door, after a few more years rotting slowly and falling apart, could become a deadly trap not only for unwelcome guests but also wild animals. Whoever owned this shed thought a few steps ahead and probably was a decent person. Or a careful one. Chloe wiped her sweaty forehead and looked at Steph, who just shrugged in response. Rachel rolled her eyes.

"Oh, fuck no, please no." Max dropped to her knees, not caring about the dust and splinters in the floor boards. Her hands were shaking, she could feel another nosebleed coming. Damn, fuck, she hadn't experienced it for such a long time. "Please, no." She almost sobbed.

Rachel looked at Chloe in a sharp and warning manner. Her girl took a deep breath not sure what to do next. They exchanged gazes with Steph who was as lost and concerned as everybody else.

The crickets were getting louder with every second.

Max cried harshly and then started to dig in the dust and rubble, desperately trying to clear this cellar out, to get to the bottom. She was trembling, shaking feverishly, not fully aware of how pointless it was. Rachel took a long drag of smoke when her eyes grew bigger. Chloe, also shocked, swallowed hard and took a few steps towards her childhood friend, now completely obsessed with digging. Digging with her bare hands though, no gloves, no protection, not caring about the rocks and sharp pieces cutting her skin and twisting her nails. It was crazy, it was fucking insane.

"Max, what's wrong? Calm down." Chloe asked, not sure if she should be calm or start yelling. Her voice sounded so calm and emotionless that it scared herself. She looked at Rachel, but her girl just made a small, helpless gesture.
"Give me the shovel. Give it to me now!" Max ordered. No one really wanted to move, still watching her weird performance, witnessing the gate of madness. Chloe finally dragged the tool out of the backpack, put it together with one simple cling and passed it on. Arguing wasn't even an option.

Max didn't even thank for handling her the tool, just kept digging and digging. The black paint of her face started to glitter in the light. They thought it was sweat at first, but fuck, she was bleeding. A huge nose blead was marking her lips, her hoodie, staining the barn's dust with red, drops.

"You are freaking me out, Max." Steph walked to her quickly, woken up from the state of silent shock. She tried to stop her with a protective gesture, but got pushed back aggressively. Chloe took a deep breath. Rachel exhaled a grey path of smoke. Steph blinked in terror.

"Steph, what's going on? Max!" Chloe wanted to stop her friend too, but didn't want to use any kind of force. Yelling was the last resource.

Crickets. Crickets were very loud.

"No, it has to be here. It has to be here!" Max was repeating it over and over again. She dropped the shovel, getting back to her hands. The blood was still flooding. Chloe hissed, taking her hood down and running through her hair with her fingers. The searchlight got forgotten on the dusty ground, no one even cared about it anymore. It was partly better to stay in the darkness.

Rachel exhaled the smoke very, very slowly not saying a single word.

"Max, there is nothing here! Nothing!" Steph yelled, trying to stop her girl once again. She knelt by her side, catching her hands, but got pushed again. Rachel didn't know when her fingers clenched into fists. She looked at Chloe, now lost and completely damn scared. Horrified.

Fucking birthday surprise.

"Steph!" Chloe yelled. "Do something!"

Steph was trying to do something, she was trying everything to stop this madness, stop this insanity. Max didn't listen to her though, rejected every single gesture, every single plead. There was one objective. Digging. It was fucking pointless, everybody knew it, even her, but she couldn't stop.

So many promises she made to herself. So many things depended on this one fucking thing. Crickets. All she heard were damn crickets.

"No, no, no. It's not possible." Max was crying now, she was sobbing hard. She tried to wipe out the tears and blood from her face. "It's not. It couldn't change that much."

She was breathing fast, an inhale and an exhale mixed together. Over and over to the point that it was hard to say if she really needed a gasp of air or choked on it.

"Max, you're bleeding." Steph was finally able to stop her, hold her, hide her in her arms. "Baby…"

The floor boards were cracking with every more, every spasm and twitch. Max couldn't fight with Steph, not with her, never. Giving into a hug was a huge step forward, a huge step back. She was done, she was done indeed. The cellar, still buried with sticks and stones, sand and rubble, was mocking her with the emptiness and chances for a bright future. That was supposed to be Max's triumph, her victory. The only thing she had was Steph holding her tightly, stepping in between her and the insanity.
"No... Please, no." She finally sat back, letting her girl to take care, letting the maddens go. "How can I fix things now? What is this? What kind of... world is this?"

Rachel couldn't move. She just kept smoking and watching, scared to the bone, really terrified. She had seen a lot of weird and crazy shit in her life but that was the very first time she witnessed a real insanity. There was something eternal in it, something raw and primal, something more real than the world around. Chloe's hands were shanking when she searched the backpack to find a small handheld flashlight instead of the big lamp. The gun thrusted her stomach painfully when she leaned over. She didn't even notice.

"I'm gonna get the car." She said simply.

"Please do." Steph dragged out the keys from her pocket and threw them to her, still trying to hold Max as close and tight as possible. Chloe caught them easily, with a simple metal ringing sound.

"Rachel?"

Rachel closed her eyes.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" She whispered, still in shock, still numb and completely baffled. She really didn't mind going with Chloe, afraid to let her run through the forest alone, but they might need her more. Maybe. Somehow.

She felt useless.

"No, go. We are fine. We will be fine." Steph murmured, rocking Max in her arms, not worrying about the blood and dirt, splinters and rocks, just calming her down. She was chanting the sentence words like a mantra, a wishful spell, capturing every shiver, every sob born out of Max's cry. "We will be fine."

***

Mark Jefferson slowly closed the heavy, armed door to the bunker, checked if it was locked, typed the security pin and smiled with content. It was so good to know his secret was so well protected and no one could even suspect what was hidden in Blackwell's basement. The recent school renovation gave him the freedom to push the darkroom construction in the place it belonged. The first idea was to build it far away, in a more undisclosed but inconvenient location, far away from everybody. Sean Prescott thought it was smart. He was a fucking idiot, like the whole fucking family. That would be illogical, dangerous and stupid, particularly because of transporting the objects to the darkroom and back. Anyway, Jefferson won this argument. He was used to winning.

Everything was prepared for the next project, everything was ready.

He walked through the metal steps, closed yet another door, walked through a small room, previously used for storage, still filled with old books, broken tables and all the forgotten school garbage, but still kept on without any logical reason. The pile of trash was a perfect camouflage, an amazing disguise for the secret place. No one would be willing to snoop around here.

Jefferson got so occupied by his newest idea that he didn't even notice when he passed the small corridors, the parade of closed classrooms and starting to walk through the main Blackwell hallway. Suddenly, he bumped into two girls who were conspicuously whispering, and looked pleasantly
surprised by catching his attention. Whores.

"Good evening, Mr. Jefferson." They spoke in unison, and one of them started giggling. He hated this obnoxious, terrible high school giggle. A polite smile was a well-trained response, even if they should be punished, wiped out from the face of the earth.

It was a blasphemy for them to even exist.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." He apologized, trying to remember their names. The blond one was Taylor probably, the other one... Dana maybe? Who the fuck cared. "See you tomorrow, girls! Remember about the contest! I'm still waiting for your submission. It's almost time!" Jefferson pointed at them and rushed to the exit, with a pure, raw grace.
Max was thinking for a long moment before daring to answer the question. She could find a million different words to describe how she had been feeling for the last few days and no one of those would define it perfectly or on point. The spice of excitement, an impression of getting her life back, a hunch of change faded out in one long scream, first violent and loud, then internal and eating her up into a black hole.

Breakdown. Meltdown. Disaster. How do you feel after?

"Numb. The world is upside down." She finally replied and looked at Chloe sheepishly, not sure if that was enough, if her friend needed more, but a calm, soft nod was more than reassuring.

"Fair. I've been there." Came the response. "It's a shithole."

They moved on in another stretch of silence, stumbling over the wooden bars of the train tracks, maneuvering between the cold steel of the railroad and the muddy, dark ground of the shafts. It was over two hours since they started this dance, between rain and sun, open and closed, still trying to find a common path. It was cold, but it was never too cold or too showery to take a walk with your best friend in common silence. It was their time, just for two of them, just like old times when every day begged for another journey.

Chloe didn't ask many questions, not yet anyway, knowing how everybody wanted to talk about what had happened, shredding it to pieces in wise conversations, but ambiguous pledges and hollow promises left Max even more empty. Surrounded by friends she felt lonely. The more people wanted to understand, the more she locked herself down. Her lips had deadened from whispering how everything was fine. A convenient, social lie voiding the suspicions out.

No one liked to be lied to. Chloe was painfully allergic to untruths, healing her friend with her presence and patience, even if it was more intuitional than a planned act.

"Would it be a stupid question if I asked how you got out of there?" Max finally spoke, not certain if she really wanted to know the answer or if it would be relevant. They shared more past than present, more memories than plans. It was a painful realization how much they had grown apart, how much they had altered, but despite all odds here they were, slowly taking step after step, even if the destination was unclear.

"Not as stupid as you might think. Rachel." Chloe smiled softly. She always smiled in this weird dreamy way when mentioning her girlfriend. "She saved my life. But besides her, it took me a shitload of time. Years."

"Years." Max sighed. "I'm not sure if I have years."

It started drizzling as a reply. She wasn't sure if that was a comforting comment, a mocking review of her statement, or just Oregon being a gloomy state. They really should find a shelter, sit in a nice cafeteria, find a bar even, instead of wandering through the moisty forest, but no one even wanted to suggest it.

"It doesn't have to be that long…" Chloe was trying to find enough courage to ask her friend directly, and she finally built up enough to blurt out a question. "Max, I know you don't really want to talk about it, but what the fuck happened last Sunday?"

Finally. It was a relief to hear it finally. The younger girl was trying to prepare an answer, a speech
"Honestly? I don't know." Max shrugged, feeling all the emotions coming back, waking up again. "I just snapped, spaced out. I knew it was stupid and irrational and dangerous, but I couldn't stop myself. I'm sorry I scared you all, I'm really sorry."

The need of apologizing was stronger than anything else. She bowed her head, knowing perfectly well that it wouldn't stop the conversation from going.

"Yeah, but what started this?" Her blue friend asked softly. "Why were we even there?"

Max's phone rung once, twice, with some cheerful and happy melody she set up ages ago. Steph tried to reach her again, calling almost every hour. It was adorable and touching but couldn't be more annoying. Max had to almost force her to hold onto her plans of spending the weekend with her parents in Portland. No one needed yet another broken promise because of the state she was in. Steph also needed a break, worrying herself sick over the situation and hopefully she would have some good quality fun in the Rose City, even if it seemed unlikely. Her girl tended to burden herself too much; something they had in common.

Silencing her phone gave her a moment to think a tad more about the response.

"It might be hard to explain. You wouldn't believe me or think I'm crazy."

"Try me. Really. Just tell me whatever you think it was." Chloe rose her hands in the air and almost fell off the train track. "No judging." She murmured looking at her awkwardly, trying not to push too much.

Max stopped, stood in place. Not used to sharing her fears, to express them in any way other than awkward gestures, she was about to reveal more than ever before. It was the right time, right place, even the drizzle seemed soothing, but courage was a weird thing, vanishing and appearing like the flutter of a butterfly's wings.

"What if I really am losing my mind?"

"Then I will find it and put it back. That's what friends are for." Chloe winked and smiled. "Chill."

So, Max tried to chill, tried to relax, even if it was a task on its own, not related to the story she had to tell. Chloe reached for her hand with a simple, tender gesture, ready to listen, prepared and unprepared at the same time. They hadn't held hands for such a long time and it was a different grip, different affection. Less fire, less anticipation, more clouds of worry and drizzle.

"A long time ago I met a girl." Max started, and the need of movement, of keeping going was stronger than being paralyzed by dread. They started to walk slowly again. "She told me about terrible things that were going on in Blackwell. Girls being kidnapped, killed, gone missing. She told me all the details and that no one wanted to believe her. I did. I got obsessed about the info she gave me and wanted to protect everybody."

The tone of her voice was gentle and calm, even if the revelations were more than frightening. Chloe wasn't even surprised that that kind of weird operation would take place at her school, still keeping her mind open. Blackwell always had a creepy vibe anyway.

"That's why you were freaking out about Kate?"

"Kate and… some others." It was way too soon to mention Rachel. Max wasn't sure if she really
wanted to, knowing that the point of interest would switch immediately, and Chloe would become fixated about one single issue, missing the big picture. "This girl told me stuff that was true, I really could prove they were true and also about the darkroom."

"The dark what?" Chloe frowned.

Max had to smirk. She forgot she had to describe every single thing, explain all the terms. No shortcuts this time. She cleared her throat, almost ready to choke.

It was getting harder, but with Chloe nothing was too hard.

"The darkroom. A bunker." She gestured weakly. "It was the place where those psychos were taking girls and hurting them. Photos, rapes, even murders, whatever you can imagine. No one tried to stop them since the Prescotts knew about the whole thing and bribed the police, or so she assumed. They also had access to the school grounds."

Bringing up the rich family of assholes got Chloe's attention, made the whole story more plausible, more real.

"Sick shit but seems believable so far." She stated.

"So far." Max agreed with a nod. "So, she told me that the darkroom was located in this barn we went to. In the basement. With all the evidence and stuff. I wasn't sure if I should go that far, I hoped that it would be discovered sooner or by somebody more… I don't know, trained to do so. I knew if we all would go it would be risky, but it would put this case to rest once and for all and stop this madness. I tried to call the police, they laughed in my face, so I decided to have a surprise trip."

"That's why you asked me for a gun and to call David if necessary."

It was going pretty good, better than Max estimated. Her friend was connecting the dots easily, seeing the scary strategy behind all the secret actions. If Steph was listening to this story, she would scold her for putting all of them in jeopardy, but Chloe just freed her hand from the friendly grasp and started looking for a cigarette, not even bothered by the potential danger she had been in.

Max's palm became very empty.

"Yeah, I tried to keep it safe. We wouldn't storm this place anyway, I just want to confirm it, but the darkroom… wasn't there. I'm not even sure if it exists at all. I'm questioning everything right now. I put so much work into this, stressing myself out that somebody could be harmed by those people and now…" Max took a deep breath. "I don't know who is the bad guy and who is not. I don't even know if this shit is really happening."

Her last words were still vibrating in the air, blurted out, almost vomited with all her unsureness and trepidation, when they reached the junkyard, maneuvering between the old rusty wrecks. The whole confession cost her less than she expected, and the reaction was yet another surprise. Chloe found her smokes, still processing the news. Max's doubts were less significant than the shocking story itself.

The blue flame peered at her above the smoke's tip.

"But Kate…"

"Kate was raped at the party. She's sweet, innocent and naïve. It could happen because of thousands of reasons, not because of this…"
Chloe walked a few steps away, smoking thoughtfully. There were some plot holes in this story and not everything felt right, but she believed her friend in a heartbeat. The natural and first reaction was to just call the fucking cops, since this case wasn't something for them to solve or to take care of. Max stated that it was impossible, hence she had to at least try to make sure. Chloe wasn't the biggest supporter of law enforcement in general, but she knew her limits and didn't even pretend she could be a one-woman army. Fortunately, there were some other options. Rachel's father could be a dickhead, but as a DA he would jump on this opportunity in the blink of an eye, hoping for another glorious victory and some sweet fame. It was weird that Max didn't think about it, but maybe that was why she decided to check this darkroom thing first. That was logical.

Something was missing though. Something was wrong.

"That's some serious shit, Max." Chloe shook her head. "Why don't you call this girl and ask? Does she have any proof? Like a photo or paper, or something? Are you in touch with her?"

"That's the problem, Chloe." Her childhood friend, who sat on one of the wrecks, looked at her very, very sadly. "I meet her in my dreams."

***

Arcadia Bay felt like a ghost town more than ever before. The rain wasn't the problem, since it was part of the landscape, almost a tourist attraction, but the overall feeling of blankness and desolation was really sealing it today. Even Two Whales felt empty, filled with people with hungry eyes, but no souls, consuming their cherry pies and drinking their coffee without a single smile or enjoyment.

Maybe it seemed that way, because she missed Chloe so much.

Rachel scrolled through the messages on her phone and put it back on the table, sighing lightly. Her coffee went cold, but she didn't care. Even the book didn't summon her greedily. She tried to convince herself it was only because she had planned to spend this day alone, engaged only with potential phone calls, but it wasn't true. Lying to others was a temptation she had succeeded to overcome. Lying to herself was way more complicated.

Chloe spending the whole day with Max was more than understandable. The girl needed support, to relax and to have a small talk about nothing, provided by somebody else than her worried girlfriend or troubled Kate Marsh, who was focused on her own harms. Rachel respected that decision and even encouraged it, knowing very well that her blue pirate might be exactly the right person in the right place to help her understand her actions and suggest the right solution. Max had been there for Chloe when she needed her the most, rejected, lost and drunk to death. It was more than natural that her friend would return the favor.

Rachel wasn't even jealous much, although it was the first time those two were hanging out together since their unfortunate fucking make-out session. She knew she shouldn't worry since everything was explained, sorted out and described as an unlucky turn of events and Chloe wasn't the one to blame. Fine. Great. No problem. Still, her own girlfriend asked for a rain check in the middle of hot kisses and touches this morning and that was also biting her shrilly with a sharp fang of concern. They really didn't have to be intimate every day, but Rachel didn't like rain checks, especially with a perspective of a day alone and Chloe hanging out with somebody who might have some feelings and some mental breakdowns at the same time. Marking her territory was one of the flaws she didn't want to get rid of.
She sipped on the cold coffee, wondering who was working today, since Joyce and David took a few days off to visit his family in Texas. Chloe was expected to join them, even Rachel got a well-mannered invite, but no one had been surprised when the girls declined. They were both in a weird state of being a couple, but not being officially considered as one, acknowledged, but treated with reserve and hesitation, especially by the Madsens. David, the biggest supporter of their relationship, also seemed relieved, probably wondering how to introduce them to his extremely conservative family. This voyage cost Chloe’s parents a lot of loud talks, a few arguments even, since Joyce really didn’t want to leave Oregon this particular weekend, but arranging a common trip wasn’t easy with their crazy schedules and they didn’t have much choice. Yet another thing to add more tension and distress to this crazy, stormy week.

Their own escapade to California was also already planned and organized, bringing more hassle and pressure. Even if Rachel was confident that everything would go smoothly, a tad of doubt was hanging on the edge of the optimistic thinking. Her father's reaction was a big question mark even if she assumed he would behave and treat her girlfriend properly. Rachel never had to protect Chloe from her parents, since political correctness was their second name, but this time all the cards were on the table, everything got revealed and stated officially. They would visit her family home not as two very good friends, gal pals too attached to each other, but as an item, sharing a bed not only because of convenience. It made her proud and nervous at the same time. Chloe was the definition of nervousness every time they discussed it.

To be perfectly honest her blue rebel was acting strangely the whole last week. Max, California, or her parents' trip would be a valid and perfectly reasonable explanation, but there was something more to it. The whole incident in the barn got Chloe thinking about something intensely and she didn’t really want to share what was on her mind. Those long, dreamy looks she was sending Rachel were intriguing. Her pirate had kept disappearing for a few hours here and there not explaining what she was doing or planning, cherishing a secret that was obviously referring to both of them. It had to be good, judging by her soft smiles against the kisses, but damn, Rachel really wanted to know more.

Chloe. Secrets. Planning. Deadly combination. She asked what this was about a few times, but a shook of blue hair was her only answer.

Rachel really wanted to hold her tightly right now. Damn it.

Her phone jumped with a short ring. The blue devil had learned the hard art of telepathy, sending something short and sweet. 'I love you. Don't worry.' And it made Rachel worry of course, because what would be the other reason to shoot her such a message.

She wasn't the only one in a gloomy state of mind though. Steph called her twice this morning, since she was also blaming herself for taking the weekend off from relationship business and spending it with her parents in Portland. Gandalf the gay needed a break as much as her girl, and her father had just gotten back from a long-term gig in California, so they had a lot to catch up on. Rachel was assuring her for a good hour that the last month was a bitch for all of them, Max had been sick as hell, then Kate, then this barn thing. Caulfield had the full right to go bat-shit crazy. Their better halves graciously decided not to pick up a single fucking call the whole day, so here you go, Amber, the venting machine, accessible all the time, open for requests, as cheap as one minute in-state. It was good to help her friend though, it felt right, even if she wasn't very helpful.

Speaking of venting machines, Kate Marsh also decided to connect this morning and with a soft, trembling voice informed her that she was going back home. Maybe for a week, maybe for a month, maybe forever, she wasn't making any plans. Disappointed not to be able to say goodbye in person, Kate promised to stay in touch, but they both knew it was a lie. Fine. Good luck. Feel better. See you maybe never. Rachel was wondering if the same thing might happen to Max in the nearest future. Blackwell wasn't a perfect place to heal any kind of traumatic experience. She suddenly realized she
would miss this freckled mystery if things turned out badly. They might not get each other, but she had gotten used to her presence more than she would like to admit.

So many phone calls and so many talks, and yet Rachel couldn't brush off this weird feeling of being so goddamn alone.

A waitress with an unknown face and lack of smile brought her a fresh cup of coffee. Tired and sleepy, like the whole town around them, she didn't even ask if Rachel needed anything more. Yet another example of a dead soul today.

The coffee tasted like shit.

She started typing 'I miss you, baby' but damn, she couldn't send it. Rachel really wanted to give Chloe enough space, not rushing her back home, so she just went with 'In Two Whales. No worries. Love you.' The answer came back almost at once. 'Love you more.' Smiling to eleven letters, thirteen with spaces included, made her feel like a freaking kid, but maturity seemed way overrated now.

Kelly Davis walked in, looked around quickly and took a seat in one of many free booths, disappearing between the red, comfy couches. Rachel was pretty sure she went unnoticed. Fine. No problem. Great. The poor freshman girl stopped following Chloe a while ago and seemed occupied by other things or people; that would be damn fucking fabulous and one less problem on Rachel's things to be annoyed at.

The blue shirt the girl was wearing seemed strangely familiar though.

***

"Dreams." Chloe hid her phone, glad for a moment of brief distraction. "Dreams are weird shit. Sometimes they are more real than life."

Her cigarette lost its fight with a drizzle, got snapped out and now was dying in terrible agony between the rusted rubble. Chloe's need for a smoke wasn't defeated though, so she jumped off the hood of one the wrecks they were sitting on to easily access her back pocket. She panicked for a moment, feeling how wet the pack was and everything else hidden there, especially one small bundle she was carrying for over four days now. It was more than stupid, and she should really leave it at home, stash it somewhere instead of keeping it on her all the time, but she didn't want Rachel to be aware of its existence. Not yet anyway.

The smokes didn't suffer much though, she could light one up.

"What do you mean?" Max was watching her lighter and wet pants dance with a tad of amusement.

"I've had dreams about my dad, he was talking to me and gave me some really good advice." Chloe shrugged, not even bothered by how absurd it sounded. Not a single fuck given was part of her charm.

Max shifted lightly, not sure if this story was just made up to make her feel better, or if her friend was sincere. Chloe never stroke her as the type who would believe in any kind of premonition, especially delivered by weird visions, but she would never dwell on it without a reason.

"William?" She asked. "He shows up in your dreams?"
"Not anymore. But he did. Long time ago." Chloe hesitated for moment. This conversation was supposed to be about Max, not her own supernatural experiences. But if it would help… "Thanks to him I found Rachel. There are no darkrooms in this story, but the old man got me laid." A devilish smile followed a flirtatious wink.

"Chloe, be serious."

"I am serious." Her friend rolled her eyes. "Alright. No guilt trip here, but I was hella fucked up after his death and you leaving. Every day was a torture, like time was stretching the hell out and couldn't end. It felt like the whole reality was built for me just to survive another fake fifteen hours and go back to sleep. Those dreams were the best part of my life then."

Blaming herself for abandoning Chloe without a single callback was a well-known feeling, part of Max's existence, never leaving her side. She got used to it, embraced and tried to work it out, she was working it out even now. It was hard to switch gears and focus on the other part. She managed somehow.

"I know the feeling."

Chloe sat back on the rusted hood, nesting herself with metal squeaks and joining her friend in cold-ass misery. It felt better to sit side by side with her, instead of waving her hands in a theatrical speech wandering around. This department was already taken by some sassy blonde that she was about to mention again.

"I could talk to my dad every night and about everything, really. Sometimes we were just driving or joking. Sometimes there were just memories, repeated over and over. But it was nice. It changed when I met Rachel and it started with problems. Our first date was a fucking disaster." She snorted lightly.

"Really?" Max frowned with surprise. She never asked about the details and talking about Rachel wasn't the first thing that came to her mind when she planned her day, but fuck plans anyway, they never worked, and Chloe wouldn't shut up about her girlfriend. "I thought you had fun at this Firewalk gig."

Her friend blinked, pretty sure she had never told Max about the first time her and Rachel met and bonded, but then she recalled the birthday present of a polaroid photo and waved her questions out quickly.

"Nah, it wasn't really a date, it was just a meet up. Accidental freaking encounter."

"Rachel is a bad influence for your vocabulary." Max finally stated, shaking her head and fighting with the smile, trying to be serious. It felt good to smile though. Why the hell battle over it?

"She hella is. Anyway, the next day we ditched school, jumped on a train and got carried away. It got complicated, the whole romantic thing went to shit, and she got pretty upset out of nowhere. I mean, I know why she acted that way, but we started fighting. I seriously thought that was it. That I just found her, started to fall for her and she dumped me right away." Chloe winced at her memory, still poked by a spike of sorrow. "Rachel left me here, at the junkyard, alone."
Max stopped smiling.

"I'm so sorry, Chloe."

"Don't be sorry." Her friend scoffed. "You know who is waiting for me at home, right? Anyway, the
day went to shit, and the best idea was…"

"To drift into a dream." She had been cut off instantly.

Chloe nodded and cleared her throat fast, slipping through the most disturbing and painful aspects of
the story. Her father's car was rotting only a few feet away, still haunting and reminding of the dark,
hopeless months when her mind was one big black hole. It was hard to even look at this useless pile
of metal, mainly today, still not covered nor touched for years. The whole junkyard was one big
playground for her memories, positive and negative, but like her whole past, unfixable.

It was the future that needed fixing.

"Pretty much." This drizzle was obviously in collusion with her health department, stifling one
cigarette after another. Chloe threw out a useless piece of tobacco. "I took a nap and my dad was
waiting there telling me, that Rach can act like a bitch but she hella needs me. So, get up, Chloe, be
nice and find your woman. I did, damn it, freaking daddy's girl. I found her exactly where he told
me, and the rest is history."

"More like a beginning. I don't think you two are done yet."

"Not even close. So if you thought I'm not gonna fall for this dreaming thing, sorry to disappoint
you, Max. I do believe in this shit. My dead father was giving me relationship advice from the very
start, so who am I to judge?"

An extensive, slow exhale of relief was so strong and visible that Chloe felt Max's breath on her
cheek, even if sitting a foot away. Was it a wind of change of some sorts? Was it a sign of hope?
They tried to find a way to bond again, to reattach their strings instead of tangling them, and they
finally did it over the wistful delusions.

"Thank you. You have no idea how much it means to me, that I can talk to somebody... To you…”
Max covered Chloe's hand with her palm with a sheepish gesture. "…Freely. Not worrying that you
would think I'm nuts."

They looked at each other for a long tender moment, one that could change into something
dangerous and uncomfortable within seconds. Something, that would bring more complications,
more banters, confusions and hell knew what else. Max took another deep breath, but she didn't pull
her hand back. The touch wasn't unwanted, the strings got attached again, leading in an unexpected
direction. Chloe felt the weight of the small bundle in her back pocket, now surprisingly heavy. Her
breath also got heavy. The plans could go to shit so easily.

She broke off with the simplest question she could think of.

"What about Steph?"

The next exhale was way faster and was lacking the previous delight. Chloe squeezed her phone in
her hand hoping for the pleasant buzz of a message, of a thought from far away. She needed it
especially now.

"Steph loves me, but sometimes I think... She loves me too much.” The younger girl seemed
captivated by the landscape of garbage, studying every single element, now shining in the rain.
"She's worrying too much, like really."

"She has a good reason."

Chloe shot another text message as fast as she was firing questions and suggestions, obviously done with the long speeches. Max looked at her shyly. There was still something about her pirate, a touch of blue flame that made her heart beat faster not only in a friendly way. Odd. Not odd. Complicated. Maybe she was overthinking it, but it seemed reciprocated to some extent.

They both didn't need more hitches.

"Steph likes to solve problems, to find a solution and proceed. The thing is that I don't know how to solve this, and I can't give her any hints. I think it scares her and it breaks my heart. We've been talking about going to a therapist or something." Max confessed, breaking the routine of hiding anything unpleasant about her relationship from Chloe. They both were guilty of taking part in an unstoppable contest of proving how their partners for life were perfect, a game that they played well, but now felt fake, even if they both loved and were being loved. Girlfriend talk was a clear choice of getting out from a moment, muffled with peculiar, unnamed feelings.

"It's not a stupid idea." Chloe murmured, still lurking on her phone.

Max bit her lip, feeling how the connection was getting lose, how desperate her friend was anytime the air got thicker, glued to her mobile, begging for her girlfriend to kidnap her back. It was hurtful, but it wasn't. Just a friendly conversation, right? Just friends. Still hurtful.

Her mental health was the main topic here. She shouldn't distract herself.

"I've seen enough of shrinks in Seattle during my parents' divorce and trust me, if I knew it would work, I would totally go. What am I supposed to say? I believed in my… dreams more than the facts and had a mental breakdown because they weren't true? They would set me up with some pills and let me go. I don't need any meds, I just need somebody to… get me."

She felt Chloe's hand on her arm. The touch was light, but necessary, needed, just on point. She was here, for her, despite all odds. Max closed her eyes, shut them down tightly. Chloe would always be here.

"I got you, Steph will too. You have to trust her though."

"Trusting is hard. I don't even trust myself at the moment." Anxiety, my old friend, how have you been? Long time no see, like 5 minutes or so. "Sometimes I'm afraid that if I tell her the whole truth, it would be too much, and she would leave me. I don't want her to leave."

Relationships and trust was Chloe's lifetime major. The words truth, lie and honesty were her biggest triggers, especially if somebody would question their definition or practice.

"Hiding the truth is even worse." She stated firmly. "This shit can eat you up alive. Steph would do everything for you and if she didn't back off now, she wouldn't in the future. She hella cares about you, really. I see how she looks at you, how protective she is. I don't think she would ever let you go."

She finished her sentence noticing a red SUV slowly approaching the junkyard, getting closer on the abandoned muddy road. Chloe scratched her cheek not sure if it was a lost driver or a potential problem. Whoever it was didn't seem to notice them yet.

Steph. Max wasn't sure if she wanted to dwell on her girlfriend right now. It felt out of place,
especially after sharing this intimate moment with her reckless and blunt blue-haired friend, who was enchanting her with surprises, witty responses and patient understanding. Chloe had learned more about patience that Max had expected. Expecting things was stupid though. Planning too.

It was better to change territory.

"Did you ever tell Rachel about your dad?"

"I did." Chloe lurked on her phone, checking the messages, smiled fast, smiled again, then typed back something and hid the device. Max could decide to silence her mobile, but she was way to addicted. "But Rachel was in a state where she would believe in everything or wouldn't care. We never discussed it further though. After our first night together, the dreams went away."

"Wait…" Max looked at her with adorable confusion. "Did you just say that Rachel screwed your dad out of your dreams?"

Chloe bowed her head and smiled very softly, thinking about a certain fifteen-year-old sophomore who was so helplessly crying in her arms, who she had sang to and was too scared to kiss her tears away. Everything had been so new and petrifying, so randomly serious and all the big plans had been rewritten in a second, she hugged Rachel closely to her chest and fell into a dream together.

That night had brought her a nightmare, a dreadful vision. Something had started, something had to end. Blood. Loud honk. More blood. Scream. She woke up in Rachel's arms, shook and frightened and was promised it would never happen again. Her blond angel kept her word, always chasing the horrors away, even if not present.

"We didn't screw then. I just held her to sleep. It fixed the dreams more than fucking. Max. You should try it some time." She added, watching the red car, slowly passing them by.

There was something oddly sinister about this shiny vehicle.

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Rachel was done with her cold coffee, half-dead diner, untouched book and phone calls that made her feel even more lonely. It was a weird day, filled with ghosts and absence. The lack of blue smile was only a part of it.

'I wish you were here.' The response came, when she just started walking to the door. 'Always with you, dork.' She replied. Tempted to ask how it was going, Rachel looked at her watch. It was almost 2 pm, damn, they were really taking their time.

'Okay that.' Her mobile spoke. 'Remember when I told you about my dad in my dreams?' Two messages at once. It seemed that Chloe took a break from the serious business or switched into a more profound one. 'Yeah.' She typed back, not sure why it was brought up. 'Did the dreams come back?' Double message time, since her girl wasn't hurrying with replying.

'No. Just asking.' Price and her amazing skills with being extremely clear through her texts. They didn't message each other often, usually spending more time together than separated, so her girlfriend probably got out of practice. Rachel recalled the long-typed talks at the beginning, when they both had been practically being glued to their glossy screens. Chloe was never effusive, being more talkative in person than in digital letters, therefore Rachel cherished every try. 'Good.' She typed fast,
passing the diner's door. 'I'm here for you.' It was lame, but she couldn't think about anything else.

And then she bumped into somebody, just after stepping on the concrete of the main street. A scoff, a spilled coffee, a familiar scent of luxurious perfumes.

"Rachel Amber, what a pleasant encounter."

"Victoria Chase, what an unpleasant one." It was rude, but she wasn't in a mood for another brawl. The hope to just pass her by evaporated fast as they found each other in a frustrating deadlock, avoided for over two weeks prior.

"If I were you I would be very careful with words and how you carry and express yourself, Rachel." The fashion snake pursed her lips, apparently pleasantly surprised.

So, they were getting back to the good old times when every single sentence was supposed to be an insult or ambiguous advice. Rachel sighed deeply, hoping they had outgrown it already, but the small victory on Arcadia beach didn't crash her opponent's will or ambitions. On the other hand, this town was so dead today, she wouldn't mind switching into bitch mode for a moment. Why not? Better here than at home.

Victoria wanted a confrontation though, especially when Chloe wasn't around. It would be nice to remind her it was only temporary, and her blue protector could show up in any moment.

"How I express myself shouldn't bother you, Tori." She narrowed her eyes. "I would be more worried about my other half though."

"You mean, Price?" Victoria mirrored the grimace, crossing her arms on her chest. "Well, it's really unfortunate she has such terrible anger issues. Maybe it's sexual frustration that needs to be discharged. Did you entirely forget how to do it or does she not fit your gay agenda anymore?"

A missed blow, a complete waste of effort and ridiculous attempt. It would be sad, but it was just pathetic how hard the fashion snake was trying. Rachel smirked. Admitting a thing or two to herself was primarily a personal achievement, but it made her awfully empowered. She had become resistant, shielding with her own confidence and self-awareness and nothing could hurt her. Nothing at all.

"My gay agenda couldn't be better, thank you very much. Your advice in that field seems a little bit out of place though, unless you gained some experience on girl-on-girl action. If so, congratulations are in order but please, keep it to yourself. I'm not as interested in details as you are." It was a good moment to back off and walk away, but Rachel was too tempted and too spoiled by her own victory at this point.

Victoria shifted nervously, seeing that her well-prepared strikes didn't bring her any advantage.

"You know as well as me, Rachel, that I would never made such a drastic choice, even if encouraged by your warm welcome." She was regretting starting this talk already. Rachel could tell. "Be careful though, be careful with your words and choices. You never know where it will lead."

The shady little miss perfect stretched a little, considering different ways to respond to this potential threat. Victoria clenched her jaw, knowing she went too far and the contemptuous look on Rachel's face made her even more furious. She shook her head fast, trying to cool off. Amber had no idea about the secrets she had uncovered and how much it would damage her in the nearest future. She acted like a stupid, blind kid who was playing with fire in a gas station.

Poor, stupid Rachel.
"Is that another empty promise or just one of your warnings?" Amber was really pushing it, almost stepping outside the safe zone filled with things unspoken. Price really trained her well on how to name things properly. Almost. "Last time it led you straight to the ocean and the slippery slope was worse for you than for me. The outcomes of blank promises can be extremely calamitous."

Victoria shrugged and rolled her eyes.

"It was unfortunate indeed. This time it might be other way around. The tables might turn." Warnings, warnings, this girl had no idea what a warning meant.

"Victoria, if you want to turn some tables, it would be wise to take a seat first. As far as I'm concerned you are not invited." A wicked, impish grin strolled slowly through Rachel's lips. "I would highly recommend taking my girlfriend's advice and try not to cross paths with me or Chloe."

It was an appropriate time to move forward, smoke a cigarette, leave her defeated and angry at herself. It had been months since Rachel could walk off freely, leaving just ashes of disappointment behind. This day wasn't as dead as she assumed.

"Some things are inevitable." Victoria tried to have the last word. Her sweet bites were adorable, cute even.

"Sometimes we like to believe, that some things are inevitable, even if they are very easy to evade." Rachel turned to her one last time. "And now, if you excuse me, I would like to get back to my business."

She started walking airily to the parking lot, playing with her car keys in hand, when one more effort forced her to stop once again.

"Gay business?"

"Hella gay." She responded with a wild, knowing smile and winked flirtatiously.

***

Max lied on the wagon's floor completely out of breath. She seriously thought Chloe was joking when she suggested to jump on the running train, and opposed the idea firmly, but the blue bad influence was deaf for any reasonable argument. It was stupid and risky, could end up in injury or even worse, this whole railway thing was moving way too fast, but she didn't have much choice since Chloe hopped on it first. It wasn't easy, but Max somehow managed to climb on the slowly moving train wagon, grateful for a helpful hand and terrified by her own bravery. This extensive exercise brought her some weird relief, kicking out the anxiety for a moment, replacing it with a fast breath and rebellious smile.

The wooden boards were full of cracks and splinters, the metal fittings were armed with rough edges, but it felt more comfortable than the most expensive bed, since she earned being here. She achieved something, even if it was stupid, unnecessary and risky. Chloe laughed freely seeing how relaxed she was, and after a moment of reasonable doubt, Max joined her in a song of joy. They had no idea where the train was going, but they both assumed it was heading back to town, saving them miles of a long walk in the unstoppable rain.

Chloe took a seat on one of the wooden boxes, stretching her legs and enjoying the song of the
soothing, repetitive clacks of the railway tracks. The pleasant pace of dull sounds reminded her of the first time she sat here, not knowing where the road led and where she would end up. It was a different direction, an opposite one, as much as the company she was with. Rachel and her unsure smile, the first small talk, first lie. This train had taken them pretty far, further than they both expected, further than they ever planned.

Southbound to forever.

Rachel. Loving, sweet and caring. Beautiful and dedicated. Lying, cheating, moody and possessive. Demanding and tender. She had her crying and laughing, innocent and sultry, offish and kindhearted. She held her to sleep, held her in her anger and just after a moment of passion, being rejected and wanted. The best and the worst. Rachel. Hers.

It was a fucking roller-coaster since then, but she had never regretted it. Her hand wandered to her secret treasure, carefully stashed in the dry pocket this time. She liked to play with it, stroking the shape of the small box, thinking about possibilities, reactions, words unspoken. It still felt unrealistic, not for her to decide, like a fairy tale not ready to be told.

Fuck not being ready.

The blue rebel had taken the train a few times this week, always illegally, always risking her well-being, just to be truly alone, to ask herself some stupid questions, wonder about the 'what ifs' and 'maybes'. Chloe wasn't very good at planning; sometimes she felt like she wasn't good at anything really. It was always somebody else who made a decision for her, who made the choice. Her father, Rachel, Max, even fucking Frank. Fate was a bitch, a mocking bully. She wanted to cheat it out though, kick its ass and it was about time. It was time.

Max's mental breakdown, her screams and dry sobs, the final tragic climax of her eighteenth birthday shook Chloe to the bone, imprinted her, forcing her to think of how fragile the future was, how unknown and scary. She couldn't do shit to stop it from happening, to prepare herself for the undetermined horrors, but there was one thing she wished to preserve and save. She knew what she wanted.

Chloe Price wouldn't be late to the making choices party this time.

Clacks of the railroad got louder when the train shook, taking a rapid turn. She leaned back, making herself more comfortable and her position steadier. Max was still enjoying the journey in silence, sitting on the edge and deep in her thoughts.

She almost forgot her friend was there.

"Look at us now. Sitting and talking about dreams that changed our lives." Max spoke, enjoying the ride and watching the landscape changing within the rhythm of rattles. "That changed us."

"Those dreams, Max..." Chloe started slowly, hoping her advice wouldn't sound like a lecture. "You can't build your whole life out of them. You have Steph, school, yourself. People are always gonna get raped, murdered or whatever shit happens, in your head or not, but you can't just think about everybody else. Be selfish a little." She watched the line of green pines, spiking the dark, clouded sky, provoking the rain with their shrill branches.

"Rachel trained you well." Max muttered. It was supposed to be a joke but sounded like a reproach. She got nervous a little, worrying that Chloe might snap, always eager to protect her girlfriend against all remarks, but her friend just shook her head.
"You have no idea how selfless she can be if she wants to." She said softly, still playing with the small package hidden in her pocket.

"Does she want to?"

"Recently, yes." Chloe's smile was gentle, but bittersweet. "We've been through some dark times though. Darkroom times as you would like to say."

Max shivered, surprised by the comparison. She didn't expect Chloe to be deadly honest in this matter, always trying to sneak out from talking about Rachel, but this time she incited it herself. Partly because her friend was bringing back Steph every single sentence, partly because she was angry at herself for the moment of quiet anticipation, of the breaths getting heavier.

The clacks got a little bit louder, when the train slowed down before another rusted crossroad. The railroad almost looked abandoned, no one really cared much about this line of the Oregon Pacific North-West.

"I wouldn't like to say it, don't even joke that way."

"Sorry, I didn't know you are so touchy about it." Chloe scoffed with a bitter smirk and then looked down, suddenly so defenseless and vulnerable. "It was pretty bad before. You saw me there, drinking. Jack Daniels is a great friend and doesn't ask stupid questions. When somebody becomes your whole world and you think this person is perfect, you try to fix everything to make it even more flawless. The more you try, the more fucked up it is and falls apart even faster. I blamed myself for months and I got nowhere. Rachel... It wasn't even about her leaving, we weren't... strong, you know?"

Max couldn't know that Chloe just took her on a ride through her own memories, her own past. She had found the meaning of life, a purpose, a reason on this damn stupid train. Maybe it would help Max too. Maybe. What if. Damn it.

"I think me and Steph are not super strong right now." It was a hidden truth they both were aware of. The situation was as hard for the famous Gandalf the gay as for her girlfriend.

Chloe looked at her, pinned her with the sight of piercing blue eyes.

"So you have to be fucking honest, Max. Tell her how you feel, how scared you are. Show her you are not the perfect girlfriend, always understanding and caring. Show her you have your stuff to deal with and open up. The more you pretend everything is fine, the worse it will be." Damn, she was projecting. Chloe tilted her head breaking the eye contact. "Steph is a good girl and she loves you very much. The truth, even if fucking ridiculous, is the only way out, really. It was the only thing that saved me and Rachel."

Silence. Clacks. Rattles. Max really looked adorable. She was really goddamn cute. Innocent and strong at the same time. Lost and found. Steph was a lucky bastard. She was lucky too. Everybody was fucking lucky.


"Steph might love me less." Max whispered slowly. It was so hard to uncover herself, serve her own reservations on a silver platter but it was easier with Chloe than with her own girlfriend. Wasn't that supposed to be other way around?

"Bullshit." Chloe smiled in a weird dreamy way. "I love Rachel more, exactly because she told me, what she told me."
"About Frank?"

The blue-haired pirate went pale. Her heart skipped a bit. She felt dizzy, almost close to faint. Her fingers desperately grasped the wooden box she was sitting on. Calm, she needed to be calm. Max frowned, confused at what shocked her friend, then she realized her own mistake.

"How the fuck?" Chloe hissed, desperately trying to find an explanation. "Did Rachel tell you?" She didn't even notice she confirmed the fact. The worst, most hurtful secret got revealed by her own reaction.

She should be grateful it was Max who knew. It was better with Max. It wasn't.

"No. The dreams are a bitch sometimes. Now do you believe me more?" Her childhood friend answered after a long pause, just before the railway tunnel swallowed them all in darkness, multiplying the soothing sound of train clacks into a morbid and loud echo.

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His phone rang just after he parked in front of the dorms. Seeing the name and photo on the digital display Nathan wanted to reject the call, to press the glorious red button, but he got defeated by the persistent vibration. He picked up, not leaving his car, hoping the Bluetooth would make him sound better than what he really felt like.

His father didn't waste his precious time for a chit-chat. After a few typical and simple questions about weather, grades, behavior and financial aspects, Sean Prescott cut to the chase.

"Mark Jefferson told me you've made a huge progress. I'm happy to hear that."

"Thank you, father." Nathan murmured, nibbling and scratching the leather cover of the steering wheel. The car was almost new, but the marks of his nails were already deeply scarring the surface.

His father choked, disappointed by his son's lack of enthusiasm. The cooperation with the famous photographer was a great opportunity and Nathan should be more than grateful. Although every time Jefferson was mentioned the young Prescott was getting quiet, almost unresponsive. His father hoped it was only because of Nathan's annoying shyness or artistic sensitivity.

They both preferred not to think or discuss other possibilities.

"Also, I heard your sister wants to visit soon." Sean Prescott added simply, trying not to make a big deal of it. "I think it's the right time for her to reunite with the family. I hope you will join us in Boca for a weekend or two."

Nathan almost ripped a decent piece of leather from the wheel. He breathed in fast, almost coughing on the gasp of air. Mark wouldn't forgive him missing another project, he couldn't leave right now, it wasn't possible, even if seeing Kris would be nice. Very nice. He really missed his sister.

"I'm not sure about my classes and schedule." Nathan stated, feeling the cold arms of panic slowly embracing him again.

Sean Prescott was losing his patience already.
"People like us are not tied to any schedules, Nathan." He scolded him coldly. "I expect you to be there. And you can take this girl you told me about." The tone of his voice got softer, less demanding.

"Girl?" The object. He never told his father about the object. Not this one. Not. Jefferson wouldn't've told him either. What was going on. Oh god. Oh fuck. He was so close to say her name. Its name. It wouldn't be a person anymore. She would be just a pile of photos, a lost innocence, an artistic victory, a transformation.

"Rachel? Rachel Amber." Sean Prescott frowned hearing his son coughing heavily. "Didn't you mention you are interested in the DA's daughter? It's an appropriate choice, she shares your status. I wouldn't mind welcoming her here."

Rachel. It was about Rachel. A relief. More panic. More relief. Nathan leaned back on his seat, grateful he decided to stay in the car.

"I… I will try." His lips were trembling almost as much as his hands.

"Good." His father seemed pleased. "I will have Maggie confirm with you, book the flights and talk about the details. Have a great weekend, son. I hope you and Rachel will have a lot of fun."

***

"If you want to talk about Frank and all that stuff, you know, I'm here. I mean it." Max nervously tried to find a way out from the extremely awkward situation. She made a mistake, another weird misstep. Every time she thought it would be alright, that there were no boundaries, no objections, she had to say something stupid, unnecessary, hurtful.

Sometimes Max Caulfield felt she was born to hurt people, not save them.

Chloe cleared her throat, still getting used to the light of the day. The pitch-black tunnel seemed unnaturally long, especially with the bomb dropped just before the darkness ate them. She looked at her phone, still nothing new, nothing to rely on. Bringing Frank back, opening this stinky can of worms and beans wasn't necessary for her to believe in Max's visions. The fact that her childhood friend knew, had known from the get-go about this betrayal, about Rachel cheating, felt even worse.

"Damn you, Max. I dragged you for a walk to talk over your secrets not mine. I wish my old man would make a comeback and tell me what to do." Chloe tried to refer to her dreams once again, but it didn't work out. On the other hand maybe she should talk to somebody about it for once. "It still hurts sometimes. Rachel tries, you know. She explained everything like fifty thousand times, she apologized twice as much, and I know she loves me. Mistakes happen. Breakdowns too."

Chloe was close to her own breakdown now. Rocking herself slowly to the rhythm of the train's metal steps she still tried to find the rebellious nonchalance, blunt smile and courage to push everything away, laugh it off. Frank and Rachel were done. This issue was done. She was done. Not.

She felt Max's hand on her arm, a little bit shy, unsure if needed, but fuck, she really needed her friend right now. She needed somebody to listen to her, somebody not involved in this, somebody who would try to understand the nightmare without constantly apologizing. Max came back. Max was here, even if hurt, lost and confused. She was here.
"It had to be hard." Her hand was stroking Chloe's arm gently. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to help you with this."

Stumbling once, twice, on her own breath and possible confession made the blue pirate looked even more defeated. So brave and fearless a few minutes ago, she seemed lost and scared.

"Actually, Max, you were. You kicked my ass and forced me to stop drinking, remember? I've never told you the reason but... Being betrayed like that, the fact that she was lying to my face for months. Damn, I actually..." She almost sobbed and then hugged her tightly, like she hadn't done for months. "I've never told anybody."

Max closed her eyes, holding her firmly, comforting with every piece of peace she had left. It felt awful to ask, but looking at her friend, still hurt, still shaken, she had to. The words came uneasily, touched by curiosity and guilt, ripped by sundry feelings, confusion and cold drizzle. "Did you really forgive her for everything?"

"Yeah." Chloe nodded and smiled coyly, still getting used to having her so close. "Yeah, I did. Wouldn't you?"

***

"Nathan? Where the hell are you? The reception is shit. I have a request. Listen, I need you to set up a meeting with Frank Bowers." Victoria's voice was full of anticipation and hidden excitement. He could feel how thrilled she was, how hungry to get something from him, to use him, to force him to do things.

Nathan ran his fingers through his hair and sat on the black, leather couch, still shaken. He noticed a glass of water on the table and gulped everything at once, not even bothered that Jefferson had left it here for over a week. His throat was so dry it was almost painful to swallow.

"What do you need this loser for?" He answered, hating himself for that even more.


Victoria didn't seem bothered by his tone, on the contrary. He made a mistake discouraging her. Now she wanted it even more. More. Everybody wanted more.

"I have some questions for him. It's complicated. About Rachel. I've obtained some information that I would like to confront him with. You might be interested too."

Rachel. His father liked Rachel. Nathan fucking liked Rachel too. Too much. He dreamed about her every night, about her smile, laugh, quoting dead poets and live assholes. A dyke, a whore, a fucking beauty. Not his. Not yet. Maybe Mark would be able to help, maybe he would figure out a way to give him Rachel. To please. Not as an object, but as an award. Nathan was a good boy. He made progress. Rachel.

"What information?" He asked, more interested than he should be. One of the red folders was lying on the table, forgotten and abandoned. Nathan started turning the pages slowly, staring at the empty eyes, black and white bareness, transformation from someone to no one. That felt better.

Dead felt better.
"It's about somebody called Sera Gearhart." Victoria was in her own world, on her own mission. "Does it ring a bell?"


"Not really." Nathan shrugged, trying to concentrate, and when he heard her scoffing, he randomly snapped. "Frank won't tell you shit about Rachel or anything else. There is no fucking mystery in it. She was using this fucktard to get free stuff. End of story. Listen, I can call him up and we can meet him but it's fucking pointless."

He was so close to throw away this useless piece of junk, be done with all the communication, all the reception, all the needs of other people. Mark. The object. Rachel.

"Let's see, alright?" Victoria didn't even notice how much his voice was shaking. "I just want to try. Please, Nathan? For me."

***

Chloe stretched a little and started to walk slowly through the promenade by the beach. The charm of the morning was long time gone, but the late afternoon's beauty wasn't distracted by the constant small drizzle and chilly ocean gust. The train talk left her sore with some old wounds open. She needed to close them fast, seal them again. 'I'm gonna be home soon. I hope.' She typed, striving for contact, for a dot, comma, even a fucking emoji. 'I can't wait.' Rachel replied as fast as her fingers let her, and then another one came: 'Did you eat?' She cared. She really cared. 'No. Not hungry.' Chloe forgot about food altogether. She wouldn't mind getting a beer though. 'You're always hungry. Are you ok?' Her girl seemed worried. Too much worry today. Funny how much they could read between the lines. 'Fine now.' Was the last few letters she sent before the phone vanished in her pocket.

Max was watching her closely, still not even touching her own mobile. No reception for her, as she promised herself. She strived for longing as much as for a break from everybody. Chloe didn't decide to be that drastic with lack of communication, but respectively didn't make any calls, typing some words here and there.

It was still just the two of them.

They passed the convenience store, the boat repair shop and the small information spot for lost tourists, crazy enough to visit Arcadia Bay sacrificing their precious time off for yet another west coast dead-beat town. The maps and folders displayed at the rack on the front looked as tired as they did, encouraging to visit the lighthouse and eat at the Two Whales. The diner was inviting them, located only a few steps away, but Chloe didn't even attempt to go inside.

Max remembered the good old times when William was both treating them with pancakes and ice creams every other Saturday, telling them all the pirate tales they wanted. It was their tradition, a ritual of laughs, a symbol of innocence, peace and harmony. Chloe loved the blueberry pancakes the most.

"Was he even wrong?" Max asked her childhood friend, who was walking by her side, with her head down, strained with her hardships, still recovering, still overthinking.

Chloe blinked, not sure who she was talking about, but when noticing the famous restaurant, she
sighed deeply. "My dad? In my dreams? Yeah, he was. But hey, parents are not always right. It doesn't mean that I don't think about his words."

It was weird to think about her father's mistakes, imaginary or not. Maybe she was losing her mind too, analyzing dreams that weren't real, trying to make sense out of the words of a dead man.

She felt Max's hand in her palm again. It felt good. It felt right. They should walk like that more often, but their hands were usually taken by somebody else, grasped in a loving hold. Those strings were reattached, tangled differently and so was the touch.

"Do you still miss him?" Max asked softly.

"Sometimes." Chloe nodded, fighting with the need for another smoke. "But our relationship was hella great and who knows what would became of us later. I don't think he would like many of my life choices or plans in general. Maybe I would learn more about his fuckups, maybe he wasn't that perfect after all. Enough about my dead old man. What about your parents?"

The steep path to the lighthouse finally made an appearance on the side of the road. They both crossed the street not really paying attention to the cars around, since there were none, and dove into the forest's greens breathing in deeply. Max's phone twirled once and got silent. She didn't even feel guilty not answering, too tired for anything more than the tranquil hike.

"You know how it is." She responded when they started to climb up the path. "They talk to me and they are supportive, but I just have that feeling that if I crossed the line, did something unexpected or weird, they would start hell. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the divorce."

Holding hands was lost once again to the tobacco addition. Chloe peered at her phone, supposedly by accident and cursed quietly. The damn device was almost dead, basing its existence on a diminishing percent of battery. She forgot those things had to be charged.

Rachel would worry more.

"It's fine. I already made sense of it, you know?" The inhale was long and steady. Chloe respectively moved a few feet away not to bother Max with the smoke. It didn't help much. "I'm glad you did, though. It simplifies a lot of things."

"Between us? Maybe." The younger girl shrugged, not sure if it was a lie or not. "My parents still try to pay me back for all the lost time we wasted in fights and arguments. They can't, and it feels hella fake. I feel like being in between all the time. Between my mom and dad, between being ok and not ok. One step in wrong direction and everything would break down. I know that they are trying, but just like Steph, they are trying too hard."

The white shape of the lighthouse appeared in front of them, dominating the open space, bringing light to the dark, a future to the past. They both smiled while passing the famous carving on the tree stump, damaged by the wind and rain, but still here.

"Overprotective?" Chloe helped her to find the right words. She was almost right.

Max had never talked much about her family, never had the need to elaborate about the situation. The fact that even Steph didn't know much more than needed scared her a bit. It was so easy to tell Chloe so much, but so hard to confess those things, share with the girl she loved.

"Protective in the wrong areas, leaving me freedom not exactly when I need it. It's hard to explain." She gestured instead.
Chloe got her, as always.

"I know what you mean. So, you didn’t tell them then?" Max shook her head sharply. "What do you think they would do? Force you to come back home or something?"

Home. Seattle. What was her home? Where was it? Steph was her safe harbor, her future, but right now everything seemed so convoluted, so complicated and knotty. She didn't want to leave Arcadia nor her girl. And Chloe.

It didn't matter what she wanted anyway.

"Sometimes it's a good idea." She admitted, even if her intuition screamed in protest. It wasn't her time to get back, to break free. Not yet. "Take Kate, for example."

"She's going back?" Chloe almost choked on her own smoke.

"She needs to find her way, since the dreams didn't help her much."

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'Rach.' Her phone buzzed. 'Yeah?' She replied and froze above the screen watching it attentively. The animation of the three dots suggested that Chloe was typing, then scratching, stopping, then typing again. 'I like your name.' And another text just after a second. '*love'.

Rachel shook her head, lying back on the bed. It was more comfortable that way and it felt like them, not just like her. The radio was pleasantly disturbing the silence of their bedroom, stretching the time of anticipation, making it more bearable. 'me or my name?' She decided to push a little. 'both.' Damn right, Price. Good that you remembered. 'I love your name too.' Silence. 'Chloe?' Still nothing. 'I fucking miss you.' Oh shit, it was too much, but she was playing the good girl the whole day. 'Take your time, no pressure.' Three dots appeared again. 'It's ok. I miss you hella more.' One more text followed. 'Can't wait for California.'

That was random. Rachel frowned a little. 'Really? No stress?' Why did her girl bring that in? 'Not with you.' She could almost sense Chloe shifting a little, trying to express herself differently, describe it without dwelling. 'Stress too, but I can't wait.' They both couldn't wait, even if nervous as hell. 'Why?' Rachel smiled. She loved asking questions. 'Because.' The three dots appeared and vanished quickly. Chloe ran out of time or didn't want to share it digitally. It was fine, Rachel could wait for an analog answer.

A blue notification politely informed that she got a message. She opened her email on her phone, too lazy to actually grab her laptop. Spam? Nah, it was Blackwell Academy sending their bulletin about the newest courses. Rachel wondered who the hell scheduled this mailing on Saturday evening. No one would pay attention to it, except a few nerds and geeks. On the other hand, that might have been their intention. The Crime Scene Photography seminar seemed interesting and it would fit her pre-law program, especially with the homicide class she was taking. Mark Jefferson was the teacher, apparently experienced in true crime. Interesting. She was trying to avoid this dude, following Max's advice, but most of her warnings and premonitions had gone to shit anyway. Maybe she shouldn't restrain herself and try it? It could be helpful for college and stuff.

Mark Jefferson wouldn't be a danger in a class full of students anyway.
'Hi Rach, any plans for the second weekend of Oct.?' Her phone buzzed again. Nathan Prescott sacrificed his precious weekend time to contact her. What did he want this time? 'Trip to Cali.' She typed back, killing his hopes with three words and a period. 'Alone?' He could be annoying and clingy and decided to present it right now. Great. 'With Chloe.' This should shut him up. The animated dots weren't awaited this time but appeared regardless. Nathan really tried to hit on her again, after all the shit they had been through. 'Ah, k. let me know if ur plans change.' Polite, normal response. Good for him. Maybe he finally transformed into a human being. Arcadia Bay didn't need another competitor in the asshole of the century contest.

'Why?' She had to ask, even if not curious. 'Wanna go to Fl?' Her phone asked. Rachel scoffed. An invite? South Florida seemed alluring in mid-fall, but California was way more tempting and had some blue kick to it. 'With you?' She didn't intend to mock him, but the question could look mean. Whatever. 'Yeah. Will be cool.' Oh, so he was polite only to get into her pants. 'Sorry Nathan, I'm all taken.' Silence. 'Still Price?' Rachel rolled her eyes. 'Still.' She probably should elaborate that no modification to this aspect of her life was planned anytime soon, but it would be a waste of time and battery. 'let me know when ur plans change.' Killing hopes was hard, even if they were the property of a dickhead. A mentally unhinged dickhead though. 'They won't.' The text was as firm as it could be. Silence. 'Goodnight, Nathan.' She typed, accidentally feeling sorry for him. Poor asshole, waiting for things that never meant to happen. 'Goodnight, Rach.' Came the reply, no high hopes included.

She was about to toss her phone away and stick to a book instead, but she ended up reading previous conversations with Chloe, scattered to letters, half-sentences, weird words and messages delivered off her mobile's screen. Rachel always wondered if her girlfriend was doing the same, when missing her, and how many times they both went through the same letters.


"Come back home, Chloe." Rachel whispered to herself looking at the ceiling, throwing the phone away. "Come back home, goddamnit."

***

Sunset by the lighthouse always seemed tacky, but Arcadia Bay didn't offer much entertainment or interesting distraction. It wasn't a popular place though, always stormed by rapid winds and requiring a long, extensive walk to get there. Chloe liked to rebel against the rules, so she had driven her truck to the viewpoint, breaking every single law, but most of the town habitants weren't that brave or that reckless.

This time they reached the peak traditionally, no truck involved.

Chloe looked at her friend, humming softly. It was a good day, but it was slowly coming to an end, as well as their common adventure, a walk through the whole Arcadia and back. It would be nice to celebrate it somehow, and Max still looked tense, still not fully relaxed. Right now, tired of talking, she was just enjoying the view of the burning horizon, painting the world in orange and pink.

"You look hella stressed." Chloe sat back on the bench and reached in her pocket, dragging a big, fat, herbal surprise. "So how about some pot?"
Max narrowed her eyes and shook her head. She could find at least fifty thousand reasons why it was a bad idea, but every one of them seemed too logical and too serious. She had never tried weed, always refusing and never hanging with a crowd who would use it frequently. Steph had more experience in that field, but they had never shared a joint. Maybe they should.

"What about Rachel?" She asked, not really worrying about the potential blond danger, but always respectful and careful. "Wouldn't she mind?"

The blue rebel already made her decision and handed her the vice, looking for some fire. One of the lighters shared the same sad fate as many of her cigarettes today, dying in the lack of sparks and with a wetted stone. The second one had been nastily hiding somewhere.

"We wouldn't tell her. She doesn't have to know everything. And she wouldn't mind. I guess." Chloe finally lit it up. She really didn't think Rachel would care that much. "Pot emergency. C'mon."

They shared the thick rolled joint, passing it back and forth, taking long, deep drags. Chloe smiled at the familiar taste, winked, hissed with pleasure. Max bent over coughing desperately. The seagulls, scared by the sudden sound, soared into the air, spiking up, flying above their heads screaming.

"You are bad influence, Chloe Price." She panted, gasping on air.

"You are not the first one who tells me that."

Time slowed down rapidly and the bench got so uncomfortable, rough and uneven. Chloe moved nervously, and then got up, deciding to lay on the grass by the edge of the cliff to enjoy the view more. Sitting was way overrated and the bay too tempting. She checked her phone for the very last time and scoffed seeing it died in the meantime. Great. No reception, no calls, no messages. Just the two of them, cutting off the world outside. Max followed her friend, not bothered by the fact that the ground was still wet from the morning rain.

They felt small under the sky, first orange, then painfully red, then purple and black. Captivated by the kaleidoscope of shades they lied still, arm by arm, filling their ears with the screeching song of seagulls and the crashes of the ocean waves breaking down below.

"Wooowseeeer." Max gasped.

It was finally starting to kick in. Chloe smirked, way more resistant to the vice but feeling the fluffy numbness embracing her slowly. The conversation would change into silly and stupid, nothing serious would happen, no reservations, no evils, no barriers. Just like old times, or so she assumed.

"You are eighteen for fuck's sake, you can't say wowsers anymore." She bumped Max's arm lightly and then laughed, pleased to catch her off guard. "Nah, I'm bullshitting you, you can say it until you're 40. Chillin' now?"

"Chillin' like a villain." Max focused intensively on one of the birds, who was walking around nonchalantly, almost winking at her. She kept wondering what seagulls dreamt about. "Did you ever notice that the faster birds walk the faster their heads move?"

"I think I knew that."

"I think, therefore I am."

"I doubt thinking therefore I might not be. Cogito ergo not anytime sum."

Max rolled over and found herself hugged to Chloe's chest. The fates collided again, bringing the
two broken girls together. Their damages were different, the ruins shaped contrarily, hence it was hard to find the balance. Chloe seized her close, wanted her closer, hungry for her warmth. Time was spinning, up and down, back and forth. Whatever.

"You're comfy."

"Many flaws I have. Comfy is only one of them."

The air was slowing down and speeding up, but Chloe kept her in place, holding softly, gently stroking her arm, singing a lullaby for her anxiety with calm gestures. Max closed her eyes, and the hourglass of memories got turned upside down, when she recalled the last time they were resting like that, free from obstacles and not chained to anything or anybody. She could almost feel the sand falling through her fingers.

"Remember when we were kids and everything was so damn simple? We weren't afraid of tomorrow and had no creepy secrets? Nothing was impossible." She mumbled, finding Chloe's jacket way too cozy.

Her friend muttered a response, something that could be taken as a nod and agreement, but her mind was in a different place, traveling through an altered set of squirreled questions. She missed this state of silly philosophy, being so fearless and valiant.

"Have you ever had this feeling that you make plans and you try and try and nothing happens because it's not up to you?" The blue-haired question cut the thick air, spiking through the orange, pink and red, floating around, circling.

Max could almost see the words flying, transforming in the air.

"You just defined my whole life, Chloe. One sentence and on point. Nailed it." She poked her chest, waking up a series of short laughs.

"I think I have a gift. With nailing. Sometimes."

It felt good to leave the kingdom of responsibility, always so crowded and limited, and wander through the dry and vacant land of recklessness where every element was moving so fast, rotating and whirling, tempting and promising. Banished by the power of weed they could just leave everything behind, letting themselves to be wild, foolish, and free from the burdens. They both wanted to taste something that wasn't theirs. Something that would feel so wrong after and so wrong before, but now it was just on point. Nail it.

Chloe's blue eyes were watching the sky, daydreaming, wondering, sailing through. She was so close, Max could kiss her again, just like that, no obstacles, no concerns. Just one time. It wouldn't be important, it wouldn't matter, just a gesture, no biggie. Not to tangle the strings, not to attach them otherwise, but to distract the dream, dare to challenge it.

"Chloe…" She warned her friend.

Her lips were so close, too close, inches away. Trembling. Vulnerable. She could stop this, they both should stop this. Max moved up, feeling Chloe's hand around her arm, inciting. Not protesting, welcoming. Just one time. For good old time's sake.

She already closed her eyes and was traveling forward blindly, knowing, feeling this kiss before it happened.

It didn't happen.
"I'm gonna marry her." She heard Chloe's raspy, low voice, felt her breath against her lips. "She will be my first mate."

"What?"

Max opened her eyes, waking up, shaking off the weakness, realizing how close she was to making a horrible mistake. Marriage. Wedding. She knew that. Chloe said that once, it was their plan anyway, like one day. In the future. It seemed this one day was coming faster than she thought. Like hella faster.

"Rachel. You know." Her amazingly clueless childhood friend seemed seriously concerned with her lack of memory. "The blonde that hangs around with me?"

The small universe of freckles curled inside, imploded with blame. Chloe bit her lip, trying to keep the emotional mess at the bay with a foot-long pole. She was still holding her, but the warmth was gone.

"I thought I'm your first mate." She heard a frail whisper.

"You are my second mate, so it's almost like the same, but not."

"You are still a baby pirate." Max poked her chest again. She really was high as a kite. "Baby pirates don't get married."

"Pirates do whatever pleases them." Chloe snorted and scratched her nose. "Are you ok with it?"

"You being a pirate?"

"No, me getting married?"

Their eyes met again for a short while, but they couldn't stand the sight, breathing faster, but not breaking the embrace. It was embarrassing. Heavy. Max moved nervously but was held tightly. Marriage, a formal union seemed unnecessary, unrealistic, odd. An important, required step, but she couldn't picture Chloe and Rachel actually taking it. It was just bizarre. Her and Steph on the other hand…

She missed her girlfriend so much. Stupid Portland and stupid obligations. She should rest on her chest, not on Chloe's. Everything would be so much easier, less substantial. Marriage.

"Why do you ask? You and Rachel… If you worked stuff out..." She tried to think logically again, playing with the punk metal pins on her friend's jacket. "You are good to each other, right?"

Chloe nodded, dreaming about the blue feather, its facture and softness. For years it was the only stable tender thing about Rachel, the only sign of sensibility and fragility. The blond fury could be so rough, mean and unfair sometimes, stepping on open wounds, careless whether they bled or not. Sometimes, but not anymore. Now she was the feather herself.

"Rachel changed a lot, like drastically." She whispered.

It was time to get back to the castle of being an adult, an experienced and responsible human being, a friend, not a reckless brat. Max took a deep breath.

"Maybe this whole thing with Frank was her rebirth? Growing up?"

"I wouldn't be able to tell. I don't know shit about growing up." The short shrug was supposed to
cover all the scars that ran deep.

Max knew all about hiding scars, wounds, secrets. It felt unpleasantly pleasant that they had a few more things in common and they didn't fall out from each other so radically.

"I think you do." Another poke on her chest, then a soft touch on blue cheek. "Are you afraid that she might change again?"

"Yes. No. Yeah." Chloe rubbed her forehead, played with a lock of her own hair. She used to do it a lot when she was a kid. "Everything is so picture perfect after Frank, and Rachel... She tries harder than ever before. She snaps sometimes though but she keeps me in place, she keeps me safe. For years I thought I didn't deserve her and now I'm scared that she will get bored with being so good to me and do some weird shit, meet somebody else. I don't know."

It was only one of her worries, the most distant, the most buried down, but the truth was Chloe missed the rebellious Rachel, the drunk and cavalier, who didn't give a single fuck, taking the world by storm, not caring about anything and anybody. Crazy Rachel. This part of her girl was gone, not showing up and her blue pirate shouldn't complain, since it was more than beneficial for her own sake. Had Rachel really changed and killed this rebellious kid inside or merely suppressed it, letting the cruel fiend to make a comeback in full force?

Was she the only coherent one in rebelling against the world?

"And you want to make sure it will stay like that with a marriage?" Max's eyebrow rose. "It doesn't work that way. People change all the time."

Change. Chloe sighed. Today everything reminded her of changing. She touched the little treasure bulking her pocket. Her thoughts shifted, changed gears and the hourglass of memories turned upside down once again when she recalled a similar conversation, built on familiar words, but it happened in her mind a long, long time ago.

This weed was strong shit.

"My dead dad once said that it doesn't matter how much she would change, it matters how much I can change along with her. If we grow together, not apart, we're good. I want it to be good. Being apart doesn't do me any better."

"Your dreams are better than mine." She felt Max stretching a little. It felt so good to feel her close, not wondering about another step, the future and all that shit. Max was just present. Just here.

"It's not a premonition contest." Chloe looked at her friend softly and brushed off the brown hair from her cheek. Her fingers touched her skin longer than expected. Max smiled. Chloe smiled back. "How does it feel now? Better?"

"Better." The younger girl nodded and rolled back on the ground, giving up resting on the blue chest. "I just hate being weak."

Chloe felt empty again, but in an eerie, distinctive way.

"Sometimes you have to get weaker to get stronger." She muttered, watching one of the seagulls landing very close to them. Damn birds were watching them all the time, walking in circles and yelling to each other, knowing too much. "This bird is playing on my nerves with its head and shit."

Max laughed so loud she almost scared the damn poultry to death.
"I'm painfully pirate about it."

"Painfully pirate?"

"Aware."

"Ah. Ok." Chloe sighed and got up, brushing off her wet pants and stained jacket from the dry mud, wet grass and small sandy rocks. "Aright, time to fly away from this shithole. I have a meeting planned and I'm already fucking late. You're good?"

Max didn't make single attempt to stand up, contemplating the full moon, flashing in the sky like a big, natural searchlight. Nice competition for the lonely lighthouse, now closed and useless, but still looking for those lost at the sea. Max could swear the morning was here 5 minutes ago. The day vanished so freaking fast.

"I'm awesome." She confirmed, and then frowned lightly. "Wait, meeting with whom?"

"Ah, you know, some old dreamy friend I've almost forgotten about." Her friend was adorably helpless without a watch, and since checking the time on her phone wasn't an option she was getting nervous. "C'mon, I'm gonna take you home."

"I'm already home, Chloe." Max stretched once again and shook her head with total bliss. "I don't need to be taken anywhere."

***

"Dear Rachel." She rolled her eyes hearing Max's abnormally low voice. It was very calm, very peaceful and very, very baked. Apparently walking around wasn't the only activity those two had decided to pursue and Rachel couldn't really blame her girlfriend for suggesting some vice. She would probably propose something similar, if the circumstances would let her.

If the past would let her.

"Yeah." She said slowly, preparing for a long and not necessary reasoned talk. This little freckle was really adorable when stoned, balancing between being completely serious and totally dead. "Dear Max, do you know in your dearness where can I find Chloe?"

Sigh. Another sigh. Longer sigh. Silence. Rachel covered her eyes with her hand, not sure if she should laugh or cry. Max was almost visibly thinking.

"I mean, except home?" The younger girl asked finally with purely innocent astonishment. Her speech was almost trembling with confusion.

"Except home and a few other common places." Rachel replied gently, hoping she wouldn't have to explain in detail what home was, where it was and if it was possible for her not to notice Chloe hiding in the corner somewhere. She could swear it was Max's first time with weed or whatever they smoked. The girl was flying super high. "Her phone is off and I'm a little bit worried." She added, trying to enlighten the situation a little.

"Hmmmm," said Max, and she shut up for a good five minutes. Great. Wonderful. Amazing. Another delicious portion of stillness. Rachel was running out of patience, even if the situation was
hella amusing. She would enjoy it way more if it wasn't pretty late, Max wasn't already at the dorms and Chloe didn't promise her to be back home soon, not showing up at all. It wasn't only about missing her girlfriend, she simply got nervous that something bad had happened.

Chloe being late usually meant trouble. Chloe being late after smoking some big fat joint meant a disaster.

Max scratched her head holding her phone at the same time, producing an extremely annoying and loud noise. Rachel almost went deaf and marked the desk with her nails, trying to overcome the need for ending this phone call. She closed her eyes, breathing slowly. Her stoned friend was still trying to send a telepathic message, but it didn't work. What a surprise.

Absorbing the idea of what a hint was and how to actually construct one, without sharing the whole information was Max's biggest struggle at the moment. She wasn't certain if Chloe wanted Rachel to know, but not saying anything might be even worse. Sureness was a big problem, an issue even, but lost with fluffy lack of awareness.

"Rachel, did you look on the calendar today?" She finally blurted out.

Five minutes ago, while contemplating buzzing silence, Rachel was actually wondering how nice it would be to smoke some good pot with this girl and know her a little bit better. Right now, she changed her mind completely, promising herself she would never try. Not that she wanted to get back to this lifestyle though.

Calendar? What was it? Some kind of a game?

"Yeah." Patience was lost. Irony took over. "Saturday, September 28th. Partly cloudy, in the 50s. Seventy percent chance of rain."

"Hmmmm..." Max was scratching her head again. Rachel really wanted to crash her phone against the wall. "So... Well... If you know the date..." She stumbled on her own words provoking a certain nineteen-year-old blonde to commit a brutal murder in the nearest future. "...You know where she is."

Oh.

It finally struck her, information got delivered and received with perfect reception. Rachel took a deep breath and nodded slowly, felling guilty, stupid, small, weak. She should have remembered. She should have asked. She was so absorbed by her own worries, thoughts and mischiefs that it got forgotten, covered with unnecessary longing, whining and complaining. The ghost town, the rain check, Chloe's sad smile this morning. Everything made sense now.

Shit.

"I do. Thank you, Max." She muttered, still embarrassed and getting up. 10:30 pm, amazingly late for such a trip, but Rachel didn't care. She wasn't sure if Chloe really wanted her there, if she would be glad to even see her tonight, but she couldn't miss this chance.

She could always come back home alone.

"You're welcome." Max murmured slowly. "And, Rachel?"

"Yeah?" She was trying to find her wallet and car keys between the pile of semi-dirty laundry, and then grabbing a fresh pair of pants from the closet. Her only hope was to find Chloe there, since she didn't know the routine, the custom, she had never expressed any interest in this case.
Fuck.

"I… I smoked some weed." The baked freckle confessed shyly. "You know. To chill."

"No shit, Max." Rachel rolled her eyes once again, almost ready to go. "No shit."

***

Arcadia Bay cemetery at night had this soothing, peaceful vibe. No seagulls were disturbing the stillness and even a gust of wind was hiding timidly in the crowns of the tall trees. Chloe had been a frequent visitor years ago, then she stopped coming after getting angry at grief and coincidences, to finally showing up regularly usually late at night. The presence of other people, thoughtfully standing in their places like in military call, above the graves of their loved ones was always bothering her. Too many tragedies at the same time, too many broken hearts combined. She preferred to be alone with hers.

The words were never spoken aloud, as she always kept them in mind, but this time the weed, the train, the long walk, Max, oh god Max, the secret treasure, everything overall, made her talk. Surrounded by the loneliness and darkness, she shifted her arms gently biting her lip and looking at engraved letters. That was all they both had left. Some photos, some dreams and those damn dark letters. Name, Surname. The date. September 28, five years ago.

"Sorry dad, I'm a little bit high, but I don't think you'd mind. Long time no grave, huh?" Chloe smirked hiding her hands in the pockets. "I kinda got busy with Max. She's in a dark place now, but she will be fine. I try to be there for her but so many things changed between us. So many changes. Max. Me. And Rachel."

It was insane to talk to him now, stoned or not, but people did weird things, when alone, right?

She didn't feel alone though.

"Rachel and I… We went through so much, dad. I wish you knew her. I really wish you could meet her and see how special she is. She's my whole world, dad. This one girl is my whole world. She ain't perfect, but she's perfect for me." She bowed her head, flustered without a reason. Convincing a dead man that she made the right choice seemed silly. "Rachel is taking me to California. I'm scared shitless. My friends think it's stupid and it will be alright, but it's getting serious, I mean... It was always serious but now it's more like family serious and shit. I'm not good at it, though. I might fuck up."

Grabbing a smoke and lighting it up felt bizarre, when fenced by the death and sorrow but it was more natural for her than bringing flowers or candles. Everybody had their own customs and rituals, this one was hers, hella weird though, but her father wouldn't mind. Sharing a smoke with her old man would be a blessing that she would never experience. He would never scold her or complain about the reeking clothes, half-empty Marlboro packs and the stinky hedgehogs of cig butts on her desk. He would always approve, he would always listen, always understand. Hell, he was dead after all.

She kept wondering if he was really an asshole, hiding a dark secret, hurting people intentionally or not, showing only one face and putting up an act. The fucked-up world had taken away the chance to learn the truth from her, but Chloe didn't care much. We can learn a lot from our fathers, if we
decide to listen, despite of them being assholes. Even an asshole could give you a good advice. Or a serial killer.

Her hand strolled to her pocket, touching the little package. What would be his advice in this matter?

"I think I'm ready to do the right thing. I mean just to take it to the next step. Were you as scared as I am?" She choked on her own smile. "It's so fucking stupid. Rachel was bringing this stuff up since the first month we started being together. And now… I still feel like a kid playing a pirate. I wish you were here, dad. Even in my dreams."

It was scary, but she kept forgetting his face, the way he moved, how his voice sounded. She collected those pieces, scrapping them around, but everything was fading out except the impression of a retention, implication, maybe even a wish, not a memory. Another change, another death, she had gone through so many, dying inside over and over, and then Rachel had happened, ruined her and happened again. It would be nice to finally stop this train of transformation.

She released a long, grey tempest of smoke.

"You were wrong, dad. We don't have to hide shit to be loved. It doesn't matter what she's done. I love her even more now. Not because she cheated but because she had balls to say it, you know? And she loves me too. You weren't wrong about this one."

Driven by intuition, a tingling presentiment, she turned around and her chest tightened lightly. A red, vintage roadster was parked in front of the graveyard's gate and some familiar blonde girl was standing by its side waiting for somebody. Waiting for her.

First time ever.

Chloe froze in place, watching her in wonder when the cigarette was scorching her fingers. The smoke was turning to ashes without her help or involvement, burning itself down. Something was ending, something was starting, just like years ago, when Rachel had left her alone and shattered to pieces on the junkyard, the graveyard for the dead-beats, and now showed up here to put her back, take her home.

Funny, how much things could change at a grave.

The blue rebel turned around and walked to her slowly, overwhelmed and speechless. Her blond angel had never visited this place with her, never offered, afraid her suggestion might not be accepted. Chloe had never asked, never pressured, scared her girl might just brush it off, turn it into a joke, and that would hurt more than a refusal. This day always felt awkward, was always too important. William's death anniversary was always special for Chloe and she usually was spending this day alone, walking around, drinking, sometimes even crying. Being a lone wolf wasn't her intention, but it was damn hard to break the routine, change the custom. This time Rachel was here though, not rushing, not Hurrying, just patiently waiting. It was visible how stressed she was, unsure and ready to vanish away, not smiling, just leaning on the car, wrapping her arms around herself, protecting from the night breeze and a potential rejection.

It meant a lot. It meant everything.

Their fingers laced. Chloe looked at her in a shy amazement. It was important, especially today, it was important she came on her own. Rachel didn't even rush with a kiss, just stroked her cheek lightly. They felt shy, discovering something new between them, something untouched before. Still nervous on whether coming here was the right choice, Rachel wanted to back off, give Chloe more space, showing her with a gesture that she didn't want to interrupt.
Her girl didn't want her to back off.

"Take your time, baby. I'm gonna take you home when you're ready, ok?"

Chloe held Rachel's hand in place, not really listening, adoring her warmth against the cold cheek, feeling that everything was right. She was right. She closed her eyes, feeling so peaceful right now, so relaxed and happy. It had never happened before in this very day.

"You don't need to take me anywhere. You are my home." She whispered, and then she took her hand leading her back to the site. "C'mon."

Rachel didn't oppose, following her freely. "Are you sure?" She just asked, trying to be as respectful as possible. Sharing something so important couldn't be forced, couldn't be asked for. Chloe nodded again.

"Yeah, I am."

Her blue miracle didn't say anything else, but when they finally stood in front of the grave Chloe hugged her closer, feeling the embrace was reciprocated, multiplied, straightened. Rachel snuggled nearer, breathing in the smell of rain, train, junkyard, weed. Chloe. She wanted to say something, but it would feel weird to speak up now, share the words with grass and a stone. A timid smile was her introduction, when feeling so grateful for being here and wishing she had done it in the previous years. She had missed so much.

"I'm sure." Chloe whispered and closed her eyes, feeling Rachel's head resting on her shoulder. Damn right, she was.

***

Joseph Davis was a busy man, usually too busy to spend Saturday night at home or even pick up a call he had promised he would take. Enjoying the festive night life of Chicago, he kept forgetting about his only daughter as much as he had neglected his ex-wife he divorced a few years prior. Always scatterbrained and giddy, Joseph Davis preferred to leave his mobile at home, not fond of carrying the device during his drunk routine from one bar to another. He could tell a lot of stories about his lost phones and problems that occurred later. It was better to call back the next day.

His mobile, left on the night stand, vibrated viciously a few times, then got silent with beep. The message got recorded and would be listened in a few days, because Joseph Davis was even worse at connecting to his voice mail than remembering about important phone calls.

If he was there, ready to answer as promised, he would recognize his daughter's voice immediately. Kelly seemed excited, hopeful and really happy, but a tad disappointed at not being able to catch him. Blackwell Academy was infamous for its terrible reception, but this time the connection was unpredictably excellent.

"Hi dad, I know you are busy and can't pick up. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I've met somebody special, somebody who changed my life in so many ways. I can't wait to tell you more about him. We might plan something special soon, so if you won't hear anything from me for some time, don't freak out. Everything is so perfect, dad, you have no idea. Take care! I love you so much!"
The phone beeped again. The message had been recorded, delivered and stored, waiting for its time to be listened.
"We will die. We're gonna fucking die." Chloe swallowed hard, with her eyes shut tightly. Her lips were trembling, her fingers were grasping the seat arms in visible panic and terror. Every single shake, every small wave of the wings made her terribly tense and jumpy. She opened her eyes a few times, just to look around in dread and closed them back, mumbling, praying, cursing and hoping for a shot of whiskey, for a bottle of beer even.

No one would serve alcohol to a minor on a domestic flight though.

"We won't." Rachel squeezed her hand, more amused and charmed by her reaction than actually worried. She stroked her girlfriend's cheek and sweaty forehead trying to calm her down, but then the plane shook rapidly, dropped down a few feet and Chloe almost got into a cardiac arrest. She was seriously, amazingly, beautifully scared. It was almost adorable.

The older gentleman on the opposite seat looked at them with a clear impatience. They apparently were ruining his flying experience and well-deserved comfort. Rachel scoffed. She couldn't care less.

"We are in the air." Chloe's mouth was dry, her lips chapped. "Flying. It's not normal."

Born and raised in California to wealthy parents and surrounded by luxury, Rachel was pretty used to air transport, visiting Europe and Asia a few times before, and such a short trip was as stressful as a walk in a park. It was Chloe's first time on a plane though and they were both hella grateful that this flight wouldn't take longer than two and half hours. It added even more hassle to the first official visit they both were pretty nervous about.

Rachel sighed deeply leaning back on her seat wishing they would've driven to Long Beach instead. It would take like two days, they would miss school, but at least her blue pirate wouldn't freak out on a dangerous level. That could be an amazing adventure, a road trip of their dreams, with the open road and infinite sky above them. They were locked in a tight, narrow and humid corridor instead, tied up to their synthetic, fluffy seats, served with a plastic cup of water and bag of chips, surrounded with silent buzzing and dry coughs of the other inmates of the air craft. She imagined their first journey differently.

"We won't die, not anytime soon. And if we will, well…" She smiled seeing that those frightened blue eyes looked at her in a dreadful question. "We'll be together at least. You and me flying to the afterlife, united in heaven."

The valiant and courageous badass growled weakly.

"More like in hell. Rachel, you're not helping."

Her girlfriend rolled her eyes, shook her head and leaned to kiss her gently. Feeling how much her blue anxiety was shuddering made her smile a little against the parched lips. The older gentleman coughed with a clear warning. One more annoying sound and Rachel would show him what flying meant.

"Is this helping?" Chloe nodded lightly. "Stressed?" Chloe nodded again. "Because of my parents?" Another nod, but not as certain. Better this than admitting she was petrified to fucking death because of the flying giant. "For real? You've already met them, you know they won't do anything. They invited you, us. I'm with you."

"I know. I know, Rach."
There was more than one hour left, they weren't even half way down. Rachel hummed quietly looking at the display on the seat on front of her, thinking of how to take her girl's mind off of this and distract her once and for all. Chloe shouldn't be afraid of flying, she would have to get used to it and the best idea was to serve her something special, some nice memory she would hold on to. Rachel was always a huge advocate of a shock therapy and the presence of this vulnerable amazing creature was highly stimulating, so her thoughts wandered to the most obvious solution.

"Wanna join the high mile club?" She purred to Chloe's ear, when her finger started to play with the bullets necklace, hooking seductively on her cleavage in the white shirt. "We could sneak out and fool around a little." She kissed her neck gently. "It would be fun, I promise."

Adventure was Chloe's second nature and usually she was the first to explore the unknown, intimidating everybody around, not bothered by potential consequences or trouble. This time she shook her head, not being able to imagine standing up and taking a single step, while still in the air.

"I'm not in the mood."

"Shame." Rachel didn't give up, nipping on her ear lightly. The old gentleman was watching them with moderate interest, old perv. "What would it take to convince you?" She whispered with a low, husky voice. A voice, that Chloe knew very well.

Her blue pirate, the reckless rebel, the fearless adventurer looked at her desperately, shifted on the fluffy seat quickly, breathing very fast with her eyes wide open and stated firmly:

"Landing."

***

LAX international was a crazy, unstoppable beehive of replacing, moving, changing and switching, always alive, thumping and screaming with voices of thousands of people. It was easy to get lost, especially for a first timer, but Rachel knew the layout by heart and where to head after getting out from the steel stomach of a flying whale. Chloe followed her without a single question, happy to touch the ground, well, the grey carpet of a jet bridge for now, but she wasn't complaining. Holding her girlfriend's hand was also helping a lot, even if she felt miserable and defeated, strolling through the white halls, passing the stores, kiosks and strangers. Her ears were still ringing.

Technically they should be able to get away without a checked luggage, but Rachel couldn't miss the opportunity to pack all her summer outfits, even if she would have to change five times a day to present them all. Chloe tried to convince her that it was only a three-day trip, but she patiently gave up after a long and extensive lecture that they had to look good and present themselves properly. Yeah, she tried to look properly too, even if Rachel didn't say a word or make a single suggestion, still torn between introducing the love of her life in her natural, raw version or the more official one. Chloe Price, domesticated and in a serious relationship, felt the need to impress the Ambers or not raise their eyebrows at least, even if she wouldn't mind showing up with her ripped off pants. Some things would never change though, and they almost got into an argument because of the bullets necklace at the airport gate. This time the extensive lecture was served to the security officer.

Standing in front of the luggage claim line, Chloe was finally cooling down, still accustoming to the weather, surprisingly hot and dry. She shot a text message to Joyce, informing that they both had survived, and California was indeed a real place, not just an imaginary island. Having the phone in
her hands she almost felt included in the crowd, all ignorant and attached to their own screens. The first step of being a world traveler meant being addicted to her own mobile. At least it seemed like it.

Rachel fit right in, also on her phone, only a few steps away, focused and unpleasantly tense. She could joke about this trip and assure Chloe that everything would be delightful as much as she wanted, but the decision to come here cost her a lot. The blue pirate bit her lip, blaming herself for being such a burden during the flight, grabbed her girlfriend from behind and kissed her neck gently. It was a short moment she could take over and hold her before being abducted by the parents and driven to an unknown destination where all signs of affection might be difficult to express. Rachel smiled, and Chloe could feel the goosebumps on her arm when she slowly stroked it, whistling softly.

"Hi." She said simply, not very good at apologizing, especially in public. This airport crowd was freaking her out with its massive hassle and whirl of movements. The tornado-full of people was such a contrast to the peaceful and slow Arcadia's drizzle of tedium.

"Hi back." Her blonde angel still didn't turn back to her, pretending her phone was more important. "Don't tell anybody, but my girlfriend was kidnaped by somebody on the plane. I had to spend my whole two hours with a stranger who didn't even want to kiss me."

"Assholes." Chloe ignored the complaint, pulling off the collar of red flannel, so she could kiss a bare shoulder. "Who would've done such a thing."

Rachel didn't care how many people suddenly noticed two travelers from Oregon, sending mischievous and impish smiles to those who expressed their interest more profoundly. This blue devil was getting more seductive and flirtatious though, paying back for the moment of weakness and it was hella alluring. Those small kisses, spiced with bites and licks would leave hot and cute marks after. Rachel loved being marked.

"She missed out a spectacular opportunity." She murmured, surrendering way too eagerly. Chloe's hand was dangerously playing with her belt buckle promising something way more sinister than just a kiss or two.

"We will have to catch the flight back anyway." A whisper tickled her ear. "I'm gonna show you all the miles then, high or not."

"Promise?" Chloe swore with a nod, feeling a cold shiver down her spine, knowing she would be held accountable, despite her dreads and recently discovered flying phobia. She wondered if a make-out session before taking off would count. Knowing her blond merciless monster, probably not, since she always wanted to experience everything to the fullest.

Damn.

James and Rose Amber waited for them in the main hall. Judging by the red, puffy eyes she apparently cried a little before, and he was standing up, erect and proud, but his fingers were playing nervously with his fancy watch, revealing his tense apprehension. Chloe liked to think they were as anxious as her and Rachel.

The airport hugs had a long tradition of being awkward and extensive, as if the smell of airplane fuel forced people to jump on each other's arms without a reason. Rachel's parents gave in to the custom with no expected reservation. Regardless of the harsh words, of the broken glass and amount of tears spilled six months ago they all had missed each other, Chloe could tell. Rose couldn't let her daughter go for a long moment. James was way less affectionate, trying to be sharp and quick, mostly for his own dignity's sake.
And then everybody looked at her.

Balancing between the need of welcoming them with a reckless smile and pretending she was part of their family, Chloe awkwardly stepped forward. Her hand got shaken by her girlfriend's father and she was indeed hugged by Rose, who was evidently close to tears again. She looked at Rachel and when their gazes met she noticed how much her girl's lips were trembling. Ignoring her own objections, she reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together, not brave enough to look at James. The airport ritual wouldn't allow him to complain anyway, and this gesture made Rachel smile so wildly.

And they knew. They had always known.

"I love you." She wasn't brave enough to say it aloud, just moving her lips in a silent confession, but it was more than enough to keep Rachel's smile up and fuel her courage.

Los Angeles welcomed them with the heat, cloudless sky and terrible traffic. Stripping from Oregon to California and getting used to the desert, dry air, Chloe didn't say much listening to the conversation about the house, clients, achievements, Blackwell, pre-law, post-law, inner family jokes, some people she didn't know and some she didn't give a fuck. The car was comfortable, new, and bursting with the smell of an expensive leather. The three of them chatted like nothing had happened, like Rachel hadn't gone through hell and back to be here, like they hadn't left her on the street helpless and addicted. Nothing new though, the family was built on lies and was used to acting and pretending, adding theatrical performances to their favorite rituals. Chloe felt useless, ignored and forgotten, but she wouldn't exchange it for being in the spotlight. Rachel's palm wasn't leaving hers even for a second, despite how troubling it was to fasten the seatbelt without breaking off the grip. Her fingers were caressing her hand in a distressed and frantic way, holding onto the blue lifebuoy, not letting her old life infect her present one. It seemed desperate, but Chloe didn't mind a little bit of desperation right now.

She smiled weakly hearing Joyce and David mentioned a few times, even if James was avoiding the subject like a plague, trying not to elaborate about his daughter's living situation. It came so easily to him to touch only potentially light-hearted topics and positive memories, maneuvering between the potentially harmful words and opinions like a skilled slalom skier. Apparently, the Ambers made a lot of plans and prepared a decent amount of surprises to please their daughter and he couldn't stop bragging about them, not really focusing on his other guest. Rachel didn't shy over though and was extremely persistent using the term 'we', while her dad was very determined with addressing her directly. Chloe, as the important part of 'we', was a living proof that this weekend would get awfully complicated if the father and daughter wouldn't stop competing and comparing their radically different views.

LA traffic was making this trip disturbingly long.

The house was a mansion, an expensive and remarkable modern castle, a monument to James Amber's victory in life. Chloe remembered their residence in Arcadia Bay and even if she didn't pay much attention to material debauchery, she had to admit it was extensively impressive. Too impressive. She forgot how loaded they were and how willingly they liked to show it off. It was hard not to take it personally, to reject the imputation that this reminder of wealth and success wasn't an aimed slap on her face. Her fingers curled on the small bundle in her pocket, when she thought about all the things she wouldn't be able to provide, that were out of her reach and probably always would be.

Her girl didn't leave her side though, not impressed at all.

Rachel's new room looked amazing, prepared with patience and care, with a similar layout as her
previous one. James Amber didn't even blink when his daughter thanked them nonchalantly, confirming it would be more than comfortable for both of them.

"Can we get another pillow? Chloe likes to sleep with two." Her girl asked, making yet another statement. It was unnecessary, and Chloe blushed lightly, not used to being part of an argument, valid or not. Thank God Rachel didn't dwell on what was her favorite pillow of all time. That would make it even more awkward and end this trip within seconds.

The parents let them to refresh but Rose kept entering the room constantly asking if they didn't need anything, more pillows, maybe another towel, a different soap, a glass of iced water or any other excuse that would let her to see her daughter again for another second of two. Chloe understood it, but stealing a kiss was an impossible task, even if they both needed one, just for courage and staying sane. Rachel wasn't very keen on being fully passionate in front of her parents either. Yes, sure, they knew, yes of course the girls held hands, but slamming her blue wonder against a wall wasn't something she would like to show off to her emotionally distraught and exasperated mother. The pillow thing was more than enough.

On the other hand, Rachel had a tendency to get extremely demonstrative when stressed. Chloe changed as fast as possible, so her girl wouldn't get any stupid ideas seeing her shirtless. She absolutely hated the feeling of being constantly alert and prepared for a walk in in every moment. Her admiration for Rachel grew instantly, since her blond angel had had to deal with a similar torment living under her mother's roof. It was way different, right? It was their room, their house, their place. They were just the guests now.

She would kill for a smoke, but she wasn't sure where.

The first and probably most anticipated attraction from James was the tour of the mansion, to show off every room and describe each detail. Who the hell needed six bedrooms and a guest house? The beach was a few steps away from the terrace, fenced and empty, only for the owners to use. The office they didn't really have to inspect, a library with so many amazing law books, who would have guessed. A kitchen bigger than Chloe's parents' living room, living room indeed with a freaking piano that Rose supposedly played from time to time, a breakfast nook, a fucking pantry as big as David's garage cave. Speaking of a garage, of course they had to show it too, with a new Jeep parked and prepared for Rachel. Of course they had to buy her a Wrangler, of course it had to be red, of course it had to be the most expensive version on the market. Another damn bribe. James mentioned something about a yacht too, oh God, who the hell was she dating.

Chloe already felt small and they hadn't even visited the first floor's wonders yet, except Rachel's bedroom. This tour ride was playing on her nerves. She didn't want to buy this house for crying out loud, just to see it, and it would be a far-fetched statement. A master bedroom with some expensive pieces of something that was probably art on the walls, marble bathroom, another bedroom changed into a gym, because James had to take care of his heart rate. Jesus, how much money did those people have? A guest bedroom where they would probably lock Chloe down if she misbehaved, another one, and thank God they skipped a few rooms. Ah, then the swimming pool, just by the ocean, because why the fuck not.

Where the hell did those people smoke?

Rachel was watching her carefully, not really distracted by the presentation, still holding her hand, showing how not important the luxury and excess were, but Chloe ran away with her blue gaze, stiff and uneasy. The price for amber was escalating every moment as much as her anxiety. She felt stupid thinking about the big plans, about the big questions and secret treasures stashed in her pocket. She hoped that the obnoxiously romantic and tacky moment would happen here, in California, the
place that gave her this blond angel, the place they had always dreamed to escape to, and right now she wasn't certain if that was the best idea.

Not that she wasn't used to the pervious mansion and the fact that Rachel's parents were goddamn rich, but it got forgotten, dismissed with six months of having her girl only for herself in her own, their own, frugal and meager room. And now all of this. It was a lot. Perhaps her perspective had changed because they were so freaking official and as close as never before, or because she was trapped here, without a way out, with no chance to just slam the door and run away, sneaking out from the window and kidnapping Rachel to the junkyard. She wished she could jump into her truck and drive off, coming and going as she pleased, but Arcadia Bay was far away, along with her precious wheels. Chloe bowed her head. Long Beach wasn't a dream anymore, it seemed more permanent, more like long time planning.

That was the price for amber, a price that she would have to ask Rachel to pay.

Chloe really wanted to get back home. Or somewhere where she could light up. Like the whole pack. At once. She ran her fingers through her hair, missing her beanie, overlooking some important part of discussion, since James walked out of the room and Rose was already in her kitchen, orchestrating the symphony of extensive cooking.

"Wanna grab a smoke before dinner?" Rachel appeared by her side, finally free from the family duties. Chloe blinked a few times, surprised not to be alone with her thoughts and objections. In fact, her girl never left, watching her closely the whole time, but the blue pirate had a special talent to isolate herself in the sea of awkward moments.

"Yeah, I just wanted to ask…"

"The swimming pool would be the best place" Rose responded at once, already prepared for this request. "You have some ash trays there, girls."

Rachel pulled off to go outside, but Chloe hesitated. It was important to make a good impression, right? The impression mattered, even if the Ambers wouldn't change their mind about her anytime soon.

"Do I… should I… can I help with something?" She muttered.

"No, Chloe, not this time." Rose smiled above the pots and frying pans. "Please enjoy yourself."

Life got a little bit easier.

"Oh yes, Chloe, enjoy yourself." Her girl winked and yanked her to the pool area. "C'mon, baby."

Late afternoon was still hot and scorching, even if the day was slowly stepping down, replacing itself with the smudges of stars, still barely visible, but already sparkling. Chloe scoffed impatiently, trying to find her lighter and finally accepting the help from her girlfriend. Damn plane ate her fire, stupid airport rules.

Rachel scrutinized her thoroughly while smoking. Switching into the perfect daughter didn't come effortlessly for her, and hiding how nervous she was was damn exhausting, but her blue teddy bear was taking it harder than she expected. She didn't assume that Chloe would be all bold and frank, but she hated seeing her so lost and confused.

"We just have to get through dinner and we could go for a walk or something, alright?"

"Yeah… I heard that before." Chloe was shy and silent. Unusual, but Rachel knew it was mostly
because of respect and the fact that she didn't want to fuck up her chances. Their chances. It made her heart grow in size, bite her lip and soften her sight.

Taking a deep drag of smoke, Chloe took a few steps forward towards the fake waves of the pool, hoping not to slip on the wet tails. The breeze from the ocean played with the fake water surface as much as the natural one on the horizon. She felt Rachel's hand on her shoulder, smoothing the freshly ironed shirt.

"Well, at least you shouldn't complain about the accommodation..."

"I don't complain." Chloe responded softly not turning over, still watching the orange sky. Her breath was fast, nervous, the grey cloud uneven. "It's fine." She confirmed quietly.

The blond angel kissed her shoulder, playing with the blue locks. She tried to find the right words of comfort, but everything seemed too shallow or too ignorant. Damn fucking tension. Damn real-life problems.

"You will need a haircut soon if you still want to keep your rebel look, but I like your longer hair though." She pulled Chloe lightly so their eyes could finally meet. "Hey, it will be great, we will have fun, and yeah it's California, baby. Finally. I know it's a lot, I know it feels overwhelming..."

This pure blue confusion with a tad of sadness and hesitancy, tried to smirk but failed.

"Yeah." She sniffed. "A bit."

"You're so goddamn cute." Rachel suddenly laughed out loud. "Sorry. But you are." She played with the bullets necklace for a second. "It will be fine, I promise, ok?"

Rachel was making an awful lot of promises today and it usually meant she wouldn't keep them all. Chloe's life was expanding remarkably fast. She was just a small-town girl in love with this amazing creature and now the trips, the big cities, the parents, the crowds. Finding a way in her limited world was hard enough, finding a way now seemed unmanageable. Rachel sighed, sensing what her girl was going through. The sad part was there was no way around it.

One thing could help though.

They were about to kiss when dinner was served, and they were called in. The food was fancy, Rose outdid herself creating a real feast even if no one was really that hungry. Joyce lectured Chloe many times that she should try everything on the table to please the hosts, not sticking just to fries or toasts, so she did, despite her lack of appetite. Mumbling a complement about how amazing everything tasted wasn't one of her finest moments, but it was evidently valued.

James Amber watched her like a hawk and that made every bite more difficult to swallow. Damn it, she knew those people, she knew them very well. That shouldn't be that hard though.

But it was.

James. Their relationship was always weird. Rachel didn't talk much about her father, especially after those traumatic events three years ago. The famous DA put everybody in danger by hiring a bad guy, Chloe got involved in a ridiculous level and her angel got out of it with a sharp, long scar on her arm.

He had fucked up big time. It had been a huge turmoil for the family, but eventually Rachel moved forward as always, not discussing it with them, just trying to keep up with appearances. The lies, the untruths that everybody knew about always hung in the air though, circling like vultures above a
dying prey. Chloe knew them too and it was partly why she felt so weird. A guest, but not a stranger, an insider but an outcast.

The conversation was going smoother than the eating though. Rachel didn't mention neither her biological mother, the hassle nor the drugs, acting like a daughter who was just visiting her parents after spending months at a boarding school. It was truly impressive how much she could talk about Blackwell and her classes not repeating herself. When she mentioned Max, Chloe almost jumped in surprise since the little freckle was referred to as 'the dear friend', but she was Rachel's friend, wasn't she?

She felt Rachel's hand on her leg and almost dropped the fork. Her girl was still practicing the tough art of social discussion not really looking at her, but her fingers were dangerously going up. Knee, thigh, higher. Damn you, Amber. You and your fire.

You and your amazing, beautiful fire.

***

He lifted his head, taking a deep breath. The dark room smelled like oxygen, anticipation and steel liberty. Mark Jefferson loved the serenity, the last tranquil moment before the storm. He was the storm, he was the change, the power, the control. The only thing that was making him alive, made him worthy, made his chest move in the calm rhythm of breath.

It reminded him of the times when his mother was leaving him every night alone. Leaving him to his own dreams and wishes.

Nathan Prescott with his head down was waiting too. Mark watched him for a long moment, trying to read him, feel his thoughts, unite again, this time mentally. His participation was less eager lately, although his dedication was out of the question. Young Prescott seemed distracted and was mentioning this Amber girl way too often. Was it some kind of rebellion? A sign of resistance?

It was natural for the student to revolt against the treatment. Nathan would understand everything pretty soon, he was a good boy, a very good one. Almost as hungry as Jefferson, he needed the next transformation, next butterfly, next object, even if he would cry and yell helplessly later. Just like Mark had been crying as a young, good boy in the gold old times.

The price for the knowledge had always been high.

The place for a new object, the final setting was already prepared. The ties were empty, ropes were hanging peacefully from the arm seats, prepared for the prey, urging to be tightened. Jefferson's fingertips brushed his favorite camera, his beloved lenses. The cables on the floor seemed alive like a bunch of snakes ready to jump on a victim, please it with their venom, ready for his command.

Everything was ready.

"Bring her in." He nodded at Nathan and smiled wickedly seeing young Prescott vanishing behind the heavy metal door. It was surprising how much a steel, loud roar could be so soothing and peaceful.

The wait was almost over.
"You wanted to talk to me, dad?" Rachel took a few steps forward, not taking a seat yet but expecting nothing less than smooth, political talk. She wasn't mistaken.

A proper library had been always James' biggest dream. He always wanted all his books displayed in perfect order, exposed and presented as it was a proof of his own wisdom and knowledge. Rachel was sure he hadn't read them all. Just another act, another performance. At least he didn't invite her to the office, making it less formal.

"Yes, Rachel. Thank you." James' voice resonated softly between the mahogany shelves and cabinets filled with volumes, edicts and law dissertations. "I just wanted to have a moment with you before you both get some well-deserved rest." He walked around the small, tall table and leaned over it, since his daughter made no attempt to get closer. "I know I told you that many times today but I'm very happy and grateful that you decided to visit us."

Ah, so just a civil conversation, that was something she could work with. Rachel relaxed a little bit, but still prepared for a fight. She got used to his voice and sweet talk during their extensive phone arguments the few months prior but seeing him in person woke up a chain reaction of conflicted feelings. She wanted to hug him as much as ignore him completely, make herself conformable and laugh and smile or just run away to the blue arms waiting for her upstairs.

"Pleasure is ours, dad. Thank you for the invitation." She just said simply, trying to remember her game and priorities.

They watched each other, trying to predict the next step, the direction, the final destination. They both came here to bond, to repair the ties, to fix things, not to argue, but their intentions had gone to shit so many times before, so it was hard to guess how they would end up this time.

"I really hope you and…" James hesitated. She narrowed her eyes subconsciously. "Chloe... will have a lot of fun and she will really enjoy her stay."

So formal, so awkward. Did he just change into the Marriott hotel's reception? Rachel shouldn't complain, still grateful that they were on the right path to accepting her girlfriend. One good thing in this mess.

"I'm sure she will." Her own body was so rigid and tense. Damn, this was harder than she expected even if she didn't really feel stressed. Attending drama club would be an excellent idea if they were supposed to meet each other more often.

She had been free from this for too long.

Her father was still watching her, still not sure how strict and how loving he wanted to be, how much he desired to uncover at the beginning. He had missed her, missed so much, cursing himself over all the mistakes he had made and all of those he just imagined during so many sleepless nights.

The AC unit choked, switching to evening mode, and started to work harder with a calm buzz.

"I'm very proud of you, Rachel, that you were able to overcome your addiction and go back to school. It's a huge achievement and I..." A deep, long breath rose his chest. "I'm really sorry for the situation between us. I really hope we will be able to rebuild our bond, heal our family. I do trust it's
only the first visit, one of many, and you will be a frequent visitor here. With your company if it pleases you."

So, they briefly touched the subject, scratched the surface. Rachel's ears were ringing, filled with the ticking of the old, antique clock, located in between the book shelves. A constant reminder of the passing time, obnoxiously loud and annoying when she tried to focus. Her thoughts wandered to Chloe, killing the frustrating ticking at once. Amazing what one blue pirate could do, even if not present.

"Thank you. It really means a lot. I also hope we will be able to..." She bit her lip, really hoping for the best, warming up to the great expectations. "...Find our way again. I know it wasn't easy for you too. I'm sorry you had to go through it, especially mom."

Rose had suffered the most and they both knew it. She begged her husband to let her stay, she pleaded Rachel to go to a rehab, but father and daughter shared the same stubbornness and the same fire. They both could lie and scream, break things and start a tantrum, always putting her in the middle, defenseless and helpless. Rachel didn't care that much before, taking everything for granted, but now she understood more, opened her eyes and felt like shit, thinking about all the worries and sleepless nights she had served her mother.

Understanding comes slowly, and it usually hurts with secret blames.

The famous kick-out, the eviction, the words 'get out!' were still resonating in her ears, now multiplied by the damn clock's ticking. James had issued an ultimatum, a final demand - a formal, expensive rehab on the other side of the country, cutting ties with everybody around including Chloe or the open door without a way back. It was a reasonable solution, a valid choice, a plan she should have accepted, but too stubborn, too stoned and too scared to start her life anew, she rejected the help finding herself homeless. Now, she wasn't that sure if he was the only one to blame for the situation. No, damn it, he wasn't, even if their dark past was making it harder to admit.

They had a dark past. They had never discussed it.

"I know it's hard to absorb it, but I thought it was the only reasonable option. Sera... I acted upon my previous experiences." James was reading her mind again. He went through hell with her biological mother and it was a valid excuse why he had treated her that way.

Rachel knew it, but still couldn't forgive.

"I know."

The clock was competing with the AC. Ticking versus buzzing, time versus cold. The twitchy taste of California, the taste of her childhood dreams. And nightmares. She hoped he would change the subject.

Her wish was granted.

"Well, what's past is past." Grateful that they had this part sorted out, James grabbed a white envelope and handed it to Rachel. They both relaxed a little bit. "I have a surprise for you and I really hope it will make this visit even more enjoyable, but also a little something for the entertainment in the future."

His daughter opened it quickly and looked at him, frowning.

"A credit card?"
"Yes." James spoke, watching her twisting the synthetic sign of parental love between her fingers. "You can use it as you please."

The AC was getting silent, cooling them down with a fake gust almost inaudibly.

"But you send me a money transfer every month…"

"I thought the credit card would be more comfortable. There is no limit." He choked, not sure how to explain himself. "I do trust you, Rachel, and I know that you wouldn't spend the money on something inappropriate. I was unsure about proving large sums because of your previous state, but right now my doubts have been erased."

Money orders and direct transfers had one big advantage. No one could track how she was spending the money, when and where. A credit card, especially linked to her father's account would be a short financial leash taking away her economic freedom. Rachel knew she shouldn't complain, since it was a gift along with James' free will to pay her alimony, but immediately got uncomfortable.

"Thank you, dad." She responded respectfully. "I really appreciate it, although I would prefer to keep it only for emergencies and use my checking account instead."

The golden piece of plastic got hidden in her back pocket. Rachel Amber would never say no to free money, especially given to her so easily. He wanted to express his love with the big bucks? She was fine with it, really. Not to mention she could think about a few inappropriate expenses that would make her father blush hard if he checked the bank statement. It would make Chloe blush too.

"Wise decision." He nodded, and seeing her ready to leave, hesitated once more. "Rachel…"

"Yes?" She turned back to him, almost ready to pull off, hide in her bedroom as many times before, getting back to her girl, to her lover, to feel something else than this still numbness and a rigid ache.

"Welcome home." His mask dropped for a moment, showing a troubled and worried old man, who had been waiting for a sign from her for moths. The man behind the act. A man she vaguely remembered. "Welcome home, daughter."

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"Are you ready?" Steph kissed her nose and cracked a smile, grateful that the dorm was almost empty and all the students headed to Vortex Club party or the mere competitors around the campus. It made the preparations even more intimate.

"Yeah, I'm almost done." Max didn't let her step back so quickly, catching her lips and sealing them with a proper kiss. "Are you excited for our little adventure? Just the two of us, no Blackwell, no assholes, no annoying neighbors." She murmured quietly but with an undertone of silent fire beneath every word, resting over a huge backpack, almost as big as her.

Steph looked at her girl with pure admiration.

Max Caulfield had changed a lot recently. She gave up on her visions, premonitions and dreams. Some blue influence and a few long walks also might've played a role in this amazing revolution, and Steph, even if a tad jealous, was really grateful. Her girlfriend, now free from being constantly alert and stressed, was focusing on getting her life back, instead of saving the world, imaginary or
not. She also got back to taking an embarrassing amount of photos, decorating their room with tons of polaroids, but no one complained.

She was a damn good photographer.

When she asked Steph to go camping the same weekend Chloe and Rachel headed to California, the famous DND queen was hesitant, suspecting that would lead them to some abandoned barn, but Max explained with a soft smile that she just wanted to spend some time alone and called it the final act of her lifetime tornado. The smirk promised something way more alluring than just noodle soups, s'mores and campfires. Steph really hoped Max wouldn't like to take photos those kinds of moments, but oh damn, who cared.

Spending the whole weekend by the lighthouse starting on October 10th didn't really sound like a wise idea regarding Oregon weather but Arcadia Bay didn't offer much entertainment and Max really wanted to stay in town. Steph agreed, amazed by the change, by the tender touch and honesty served in huge amounts lately. For more than a month she felt like she was the only one who was fighting for their relationship, the only one who cared. Now there were two of them again, partners, a couple, not two people getting more and more estranged.

Not to mention it was about time to try this tent Max dragged here from Seattle.

"I missed you, baby." She confessed. "I missed you like this."

"I know." Max nodded sharply, lifting her gaze. "I'm sorry for everything, I will make it up to you, I promise. I know the last few weeks were crazy, but…"

Steph closed her in a tight embrace, kissing her hair, and cutting out the stream of explanation. It was unnecessary. She just wanted Max back.

They grabbed their backpacks and walked through the hallway and staircase, heading to the parking lot. No one crossed paths with them, not a living soul asked where they were going. Blackwell Academy didn't give a single fuck and they returned the favor.

When they almost reached their white van, Max noticed Kelly Davis, excited and thrilled, walking fast with the company of Nathan Prescott. Both of them were talking loudly, laughing and gesturing a lot, probably heading to the next Vortex Club party. This freshman was way too young for this crowd's taste, but she was damn cute and acted mature, so maybe that was why they made an exception. Max felt a spike of worry looking and them, but shrugged fast, getting into the van.

Nothing of it was real anyway. She had to focus on her own life. Kelly Davis would be just fine.

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"Finally alone." Rachel sighed, closing the bedroom door, not equipped with a lock. Her parents' trust had it limits, but it didn't bother her much. If they wanted to walk in on them, that would be their choice. She looked at Chloe, who was leaning against the wall, not daring to get to the bed first, still awkward and stiff. Her cute shyness was surprisingly tempting, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to take advantage of it, getting lost in some sweet passion. They both really needed it. Rachel smirked. Her girl owed her one.

She walked to Chloe, pulled her closer and kissed slowly, not even hiding what the plan was for the
rest of the evening, since the beach walk idea didn't work out. Their first joint trip out of state required a special celebration, not to mention she wouldn't mind releasing some steam. It was a pretty tense day, filled with the smell of nervousness and anxiety, and the best medicine was just standing in front of her, fresh out of the shower.

"Finally not alone. Your parents are there." Chloe protested firmly, shaking her blue, wet hair, now way darker, almost black and shining from the conditioner.

Rachel scoffed and kissed her harder.

"You came screaming so many times in their house they should be used to it right now. Three years of friendly sleepovers, mind you." She kept kissing her and pushing into the bed's direction, but her girl wasn't as keen on this idea as she was supposed to be. Damn. "Three years of being innocent little angels. They heard you more times that Joyce heard me."

Reminding Chloe of her own mother wasn't a smart move and made the whole operation even harder. Her body became stiffer and her stubborn objecting even more visible, to the point that Rachel couldn't push her even an inch more.

"Fine. Maybe. You're not helping. No." It was hard to articulate anything being kissed, especially if it was more passionate with every caress. "And we weren't that official and shit."

"Woah, being official is a cockblock right now?" Rachel looked at her in disbelief. She tried to be understanding and caring the whole day, but she reached her limit of being a good girl. Chloe was apparently about to reject her advances. First on the plane, then now? "What the hell? You seriously will give me rain check on this?" Suddenly, something silver and shiny flashed in her hand.

"Especially with this?"

Chloe blinked.

"You brought handcuffs with you? For real?"

"No, I stole them." The handcuffs were dangling on Rachel's finger, provoking to be used in the most sinister way they could imagine. "From my father's office. He didn't change the code and I felt the need to take something that isn't mine to tame somebody who is more than mine." Seeing the resistance, Rachel sighed deeply and narrowed her eyes in a flirtatious manner. "What would it take to convince you?"

It was the second time to day those words were spoken. Chloe knew this game by heart and she was always losing in it. She felt cornered, knowing that a refusal would be the worst possible way to start this short trip, but she really didn't feel comfortable getting into Rachel's pants right now. With all her questions, with all the reservations she would prefer to get into cuddle mode instead. To avoid any more defeat, she just took a step back, still shaking her head. "Rachel, stop it. Please."

The silence was broken only by the metal swirl of the law enforcement equipment, still blinking blithely in the dim light of the bedroom. They both preferred not to deliberate what James Amber was using the handcuffs for, since he was not in power to arrest anybody, and how Rachel knew exactly where to look for them.

The DA's daughter was watching her girl carefully, a little bit angry and hella disappointed. It was childish and stupid to force her girl and push even more when she felt uncomfortable and uneasy. Not that Rachel hadn't done it before, but she just wanted to have some fun, not start a fight. Finding a solution that would satisfy both sides wasn't easy, but she had one archived and prepared to execute for some time.
Something new then. Some special Californian treatment.

"Okay, I get it. Let's play a game, shall we?" She took Chloe's hand and led her to the queen size bed with a metal, golden frame. It wasn't even close to her actual taste but a long time ago, when she was just fourteen, she really wanted a piece of furniture like this. It was a stupid demand of a spoiled brat, she had forgotten a long time ago, but her parents really wanted to please her, even buy her back with everything that she had strived for as a kid. Rachel wasn't a kid anymore though and her preferences changed drastically, bed frames included. It was yet another reason why she really wanted to mark her territory with hot, dirty and passionate sex with her blue devil.

Chloe followed her, not expecting any trick or deception and even when the handcuffs clanged on her wrist locking her to the bedframe, she still remained calm and trustful.

"Alright, I know where this is going but I'm outside of the bed, that kinda misses the purpose I guess." She finally murmured when Rachel dropped the key on the white sheets and took a few steps back.

"Why do you think so?" Her girl shrugged casually and took off her pants, obviously preparing for the night time.

Chloe frowned, not sure what to expect. Was she supposed to spend the whole night without a single blanket because she didn't get tempted? It would be too cruel even for the old version of Rachel and absurd for the new, caring one. She looked around prepared for the resistance, since the distress was still freezing her inside, but her girlfriend didn't make a single move, accepting the delay in any naked activities. It was quite surprising to see her agreeing with the situation.

The handcuffs were concerning though.

"Just a lucky guess…" She murmured, not sure what to think. The metal cling assured her the metal trap was well locked and it wasn't just a temporary prank.

Rachel sat on the bed, rubbing her neck and looking around, wondering if she really wanted to go that far. Damn, she was nervous and a little bit embarrassed, even if the idea was actually arousing. She almost felt guilty, sensing how much it would destroy Chloe, how much it would drive her crazy, but it also turned her on instantly.

Maybe they would need to get a little bit crazy to finally relax.

"So… you told me you don't want to fuck me in this house…" She started calmly.

"Feels weird. Disrespectful." Chloe winced, trying to cover her blush. This whole house, the reception of Rachel's parents, the bizarre dinner and her first plane trip made her uneasy in a terrible, rigid way. The respect wasn't playing that big of a role here though, more her own insecurity. Not sure about her own reactions, she would really prefer just to kill this day with a good, strong sleep and forget about it. Dancing on thin ice was exasperating enough. Having sex on the same ice-skating rink would be just too fucking risky.

"So…" Rachel knelt on the bed and smiled innocently, biting her lower lip. "I'm gonna do it myself." She whimpered, narrowing her eyes…

"Bold." Chloe shrugged. It took her a while to finally understand the meaning behind the statement. She went pale. "Wait… What?"

Rachel really wanted to do it and had planned this spicy performance for quite some time, but still tried to find the right amount of courage and boldness. Their life was filled with experiments,
especially in the bedroom department, but this idea was indeed courageous and unique. She had never done it before, and even if transforming into an amazing actress wasn't that complicated, she wanted to give Chloe something very real. Something unforgettable.

Fantasizing and planning was one thing, expressing herself in that manner in front of her girl was another.

"Remember when I told you how much of a hard on I got during those months when we were still... not really together and you didn't want me?" She began partly shyly, partly seducing her stubborn, blue rebel. Chloe seemed clueless, even if everything was said already and the show announced. She probably still couldn't believe it.

"I always wanted you." Came the answer along with a sharp inhale.

"You didn't express it then. Yeah, I deserved it, but I suffered greatly. I had to deal with it myself..." Rachel was still biting her lip, when her bravery was taking over. Now she was just as tempted to do it as she was hesitant to start a moment ago. "...When you were asleep. Last time I mentioned you wanted to watch..." She slowly started to slide down the dark line of her underwear down her thighs, almost wishing she wasn't that sober.

"Rach… Oh God… You want me to watch you... now?" Chloe's eyes grew bigger. Rachel couldn't be serious, she couldn't do it right now and right here. The idea, still too strange to absorb, still too close to fantasy than reality was nesting in her imagination, making her blood boil.

"Uh-huh." The way she was watching Chloe, with her head leaning forward and her lips lightly parted was awfully intoxicating.

It was lace. Black lace. Rachel really wanted to celebrate this trip and was really prepared that this lingerie would be torn apart tonight. The force of nature that was supposed to do it wasn't in play so taking it very slowly had to suffice.

One of the secrets of the huge luggage. What else did she hide in there?

"That's why you cuffed me?" Chloe was getting more and more desperate as the underwear was getting lower. She always had a thing for lace. "Don't… do that to me… It's a fucking torture."

Rachel paused for a moment but didn't stop feeding herself on her girl's hungry sight. It wasn't just undressing for her, a simple strip-tease. Been there, done that, and even if it was always bringing amazing effects, this time her intentions were way nastier. She pulled harder still watching Chloe, locked in the hazel and blue brawl and taking it off completely. It was done. The black lace was thrown on the other side of the room. Rachel purred. Chloe growled.

The metal rattle of handcuffs sounded way different, more desperate than before.

"A nice torture. Just a little bit of something for you to change your mind." Rachel's shirt was long enough to hide the temptation, but she played with the edge of it, ready to pull it up any second.

"I might..." Chloe cleared her throat. "I…I… changed my mind already."

"Shhh…" Rachel put a finger on her own lips. "It's good to suffer from time to time. Speaking of suffering…" Her hand went under her own shirt gently, uncovering the secrets below. "You usually kissed me… Like that." She bit her own finger and then licked it slowly. "Sometimes kissed my neck or even went lower... Sometimes your hand was under my shirt, respectfully not moving too much up or down." Her fingers were tracing the invisible line of non-existing kisses, showing the route, drawing a map.
She was very precise. Too precise.

"Yeah…" Chloe licked her lips. That was the only thing she had left.

"And then you would just leave me alone, knowing how much I wanted you… How turned on I was and how much…" Rachel lied down on the bed, but still delivering a decent view, a landscape of temptation that was almost killing her girlfriend.

"Rachel…" This was breaking her apart, she was falling out in pieces. Chloe had to kneel on the floor since her legs forgot the purpose of their existence and standing up wasn't an option. The handcuffs played a short song when she changed positions but kept watching Rachel with hunger.

She would die. She would die tonight after all.

Her girl continued more and more willingly with every move, still not sliding her hand between her thighs but was pretty close to do so. She was teasing herself, already in fever, recalling every single lonely moment when she had to think about Chloe but wasn't able to reach her.

"So, I would just lay by your side but not too close, so you wouldn't notice… You were so close but so freaking far away…" She whispered, telling her story piece by piece, knowing that every single word was driving Chloe crazy. She loved her crazy. "I had to be silent. I had to be pretty quiet every night, afraid not to wake you up. I would just close my eyes, thinking that you would turn over and start kissing me… Seriously kissing me and not stopping..." Rachel's hips moved slowly in a very explicit way, pleading for a touch that couldn't be delivered.

Chloe felt dizzy, not sure whether she was dreaming or if James Amber added something to her drink during the dinner, making her high. It was just too wild to be true, especially regarding the circumstances. They both started to feed on the air faster, speeding up in a frantic race, panting. It was hard to focus, keeping their own eyes open and sight sharp.

Nothing about it was sharp.

"Rach..." Chloe's voice was low and filled with lust.

She only hoped that Rachel wouldn't lick her fingers. Not the fingers, not to that extent, oh god, she fucking did it. And then again, in a vehement, fierce manner. Rachel could change from cute and loving to wild and rough within seconds and now she surpassed the latter, giving the performance of her life, exaggerating every move, every intimate caress she was dosing to herself, taking them both to an entirely different level on affection and want. She had never been exposing her sensuality so clearly and shamelessly before. Teasing was always Rachel's secret weapon, but this time she was tormented from it more than her cuffed girlfriend. It was new, raw and pure, one more first time, the final one.

The blue locks danced rapidly when Chloe lowered her head, trying to calm herself down, trying to find a reason why not to destroy the whole fucking bed with one prompt move. It was the worst and the best fever of her life.

And then Rachel started to touch herself. Slowly.

"Chloe… I miss... you so much."

Chloe was right there though. Cuffed. Locked down. So close and so far. Rachel's lips parted lightly waiting for a kiss, begging for it. The chapped lips were stained with dark marks of her own bites. Her other hand was pleading for the arms around her, to hold on, to scratch, to pull closer and then just grabbed the white, matted sheets in a desperate grip. Chloe moaned, holding onto the bed frame,
not being able to stop watching, defeated and jailed in her own misery. She fucking loved this and hated it at the same time.

Then something clicked. Something changed in the blue eyes. Rachel was way too busy to notice, maybe even too shy to really observe the change in her girlfriend's sight. She created a monster, a demanding conqueror who wanted to take advantage of the situation, who wanted control. Chloe's jaw clenched, her chest rose in a rapid exhale.

"Take it off..." She ordered, and Rachel obediently got rid of her t-shirt, breaking the rhythm of her own fingers just for a brief moment.

Now she was naked. Except the blue earring of course.

The sharp gasps of air intensified. They were both losing their mind slowly and Rachel's hand was directing the pace of how fast they would go insane. Chloe had never seen her girl so turned on, so innocent and so sultry at the same time, not being aware of how she really wanted this, until it was served.

"Keep talking." She ordered again, this time not even recognizing her own voice.

"Easy to say…" Rachel lost control of her own game, but she didn't care, trying to find enough strength to fit the words between the sighs. "Please... I need you to touch… I need you inside... It's because of you…” Her fingers were following her words, exposing even more. Chloe choked.

"Always because of you, you fucking monster."

She forgot how to be shy.

"I was always with you. Every… night." Chloe bit her lip, thinking about those times and desperately trying to remember why she hadn't acted on her own wishes. She had wanted Rachel, she had never stopped, suffering in her sleep anyway, but convincing herself it was for the best, that they needed a break. Saying it wasn't hard for her would be a big fat lie though. It was about punishment, they both knew it, about the guilt and the wound still raw and open, but right now the only thing that Chloe could think about was how much she had missed out.

How much she hadn't seen.

"Liar." Rachel's whisper was fast and sharp. She was slowly losing the ability of speaking. "Don't stop… Don't you dare to… Stop." She was making love with her girlfriend, with her gaze, intense sight, responding as passionately as always, forgetting that the hand wasn't hers, just like all those nights it had been everything she could get. She forgot about the play, about the show, entirely believing that it was Chloe. It was always her taking Rachel so hard right now, stripping from any real or imaginary obstacle, devising and recreating again.

"Rach... Un-cuff me..." It was supposed to be yet another order, but it sounded like a beg.

Chloe noticed her shirt was completely drained in sweat and she didn't even move an inch. The whole long hot shower went to shit, the blue strands of hair were burning her skin, so sensitive right now. Sore inside and out, she was painfully close to come just watching and listening. Her vision was getting blurry, she barely could feel her fingers, still clasped tightly on the metal bars.

"Baby..." Rachel was in a different world right now, not hearing, not absorbing anything, just focused on her own heat, her own fever and her own touch. It was intoxicating for both of them, they both were getting so fucking high now. "Harder… Just like that." She pressed firmer, speeding up, knowing exactly what she wanted, how she wanted it and how her girl would get her there.
"Un-cuff me!" The bed shivered when Chloe rapidly shook the frame. "Rachel, for fuck's sake, let me free."

"No." She shook her head weakly, woken up for a second, when the golden mane covered her sight. She barely could see anything anyway. "I'm not done." Speaking was hard. Everything was hard. Wanting her girl was the only thing that came easy. It was a given. "Chloe… Baby…"

She was almost there.

Even if Rachel wanted this show to keep going, she was turned on and aroused beyond limits just by the fact that she was watched, so the end came way faster than expected. Her fingers stopped for a second, trying to suppress the final moment, but it was way too late anyway. She managed to be silent somehow, except a few broken moans light as a gasp of air, bending in a long spasm, then another with her hair covering her face and eyes shut hard. Chloe almost broke the fucking piece of furniture, entirely captivated by this view, tensed and wounded up. She wanted to be by her side, on her, inside her so badly, just to be part of this fulfillment.

She was anyway.

Silence got less heavy, the dim light less intimate. Rachel was calming down slowly, gently brushing off her hair, getting back to a reality with her new bed and girlfriend cuffed to it. Her lips were trembling, reminding her of her own neglected coyness. It was stupid to feel shy right now, just after, so she held onto the small pieces of shattered bluntness instead. The blue eyes were watching her every single move, grasping every shift and twitch. Take that, Chloe Price. Take, what you had missed.

"I did it almost every night in front of you." She whispered finally, still with eyes closed, suddenly too embarrassed to look at her blue treasure. "Do you want to know… a secret? I still do it sometimes. When you're asleep. I wake up and I can't control myself."

It was almost a lie. Usually she would wake Chloe up anyway, because her addiction was stronger than rational thinking, early starting classes or being tired after a long day. Sometimes she was just starting alone, with good and secret intentions, and then ruining everything within a blink of an eye, just because she couldn't resist. She had had to suppress herself for fucking months before and they both had shared the same hunger for each other. Chloe was guilty of the same sin anyway, disturbing her peaceful sleep with a fierce touch whenever she needed. It was almost never unwanted.

"Un-cuff me." It was the final demand. Firm, harsh and strict. No discussion. Chloe was far away from begging, teasing or pleading for freedom. She just wanted to be set free. They both needed her free.

"Why?"

"Because I want to fucking eat you out now. Lick you clean."

Dirty talk didn't happen very often in their bedroom, but Chloe was driven to the edge, crossed the line and turned into one blue desire. Raw and primal, not worrying about her previous discomfort, about the parents behind the wall, she just wanted to take what was hers. Those few words made Rachel choke on her breath and hiss lightly. Her imagination had been pushed to the limit regardless and now, encouraged even more, was driving her bat-shit crazy.

Chloe still didn't look at her, grasping on the metal bars of the bedframe and kneeling on the tiled floor. She was shaking lightly, shivering from the anticipation and pressure, waiting. This show cost her a lot and she was so ready to take it back with full force.
"That bad, huh?" Rachel finally was able to sit on the bed. Her legs were still quivering, small spasms were going through her whole body reminding of what she had just done. It was quite a surprise that this one moment of passion affected her that much. She crawled to her girlfriend, naked and still turned on, as much in need for a touch and kiss as her better half.

"Yeah." Those blue piercing eyes looked at her, not even shying over the intentions. Rare. "And I want you to fuck my brains out, well, the rest of it." Chloe admitted with a husky voice, so deep and filled with emotions that Rachel almost lost her breath again. The blue pirate was lowering her gaze not because of supposed shame or defeat, but because of the temptation that almost made her force her liberty in a more drastic style. She really didn't want to demolish the bedroom design, but it was the Ambers' house and Rachel's parents were used to destruction.

She would be set free, or she would force it. Whatever.

Rachel moved closer, begging for a well-deserved kiss, for a payment and her love fee. Something in Chloe's eyes forced her to stop and make her wonder who was in charge here and who was cuffed and dependent. She easily could take over everything and everybody, used to glorious dominance, but only the blue storm of passion could dictate her own rules, as she was always the goddamn winner.

Winners made their own rules anyway.

They were one breath away from it, but froze themselves in the last moment, enjoying the anticipation even more. Just a few seconds, a minute, and they would have everything back, but this moment was so passionate they didn't want to break it with a contact, not yet.

Suffering had never felt so good.

Rachel found the damn small key between the sheets, almost ready to finally release her girl from the invisible cage. Her hand almost stopped though, trying to tease again, but she barely remembered what teasing meant. Chloe didn't even urge her, just waiting, ready to pull off, to jump, to start another fire, ignite her yet again. Rachel hesitated for a second, sensing that she was about to unleash a wild, pure force. If it wasn't her girl, she would be damn scared.

Excitement could be so similar to fear if dosed in a great amount.

"What about my parents?" She asked, turning the key in the lock finally and looking at Chloe who got up and took off her shirt in one very direct move. Naked within seconds, she walked to the bed and kissed her hard, pulling her hair harshly, bending her to her own will this time. It was so damn hasty and hot that Rachel gasped in shock, impressed by the fervor.

Not that she expected anything else, but holy shit.

"Fuck your parents." Chloe murmured, covering Rachel with herself, skin to skin, not wasting a single thought on anything else. It wasn't a good time for thinking anyway. They both needed it, panting again, ready for another fall, another round, this time fully together.

"Well, I'm not gonna invite them..." Rachel tried to joke, but the time for jokes died a second later. "Oh… Wow," was the last thing she could express before being taken over by the blue storm.

And what a storm it was.

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She woke up to an unknown ceiling, with Chloe's thigh over her own and her hand on her chest. It was rare for them to start the day naked. The dorm with the common bathroom was always forcing them to dress up at some point during the night, and they always tried to be prepared for an accidental visit or an emergency call from Joyce while falling asleep at the Madsens. It happened sometimes of course, especially after nights full of passion just like this one, but neglect and laziness were to blame, not a freedom of preference.

This time it was a choice though, especially after her last bold move, last experience. She served herself, opened up like never before, surrendered to this adorable pirate miracle one more time. The memory was still making her blush, despite of the fierce reaction and all the things that happened after and kept happening almost till sunrise. Those moments kept her grounded, sealed her back up again, previously so damn torn apart by the family reunion chaos. Chloe was her home, full stop. It was the most beautiful and amazing blue home ever. It felt so good just to wake up to her naked girlfriend, innocent with her nudity, so trustful and vulnerable, when her hand, still following the dreams, was twitching a little, caressing Rachel subconsciously.

She had to smile, when stroking the blue hair gently.

The day would start soon enough with more hassle and more artificial sneers. Sighing, Rachel sat up, leaning on the pillows and looking for a cigarette. She wasn't a big morning smoker, but this view and this night deserved a light up. Watchfully, not to wake Chloe up she reached for the pack with the lighter, carefully wrapping her lover up within the thin comforter. It wasn't cold, California was famous for its morning heat, but Rachel suspected that her parents might decide to surprise them with an enthusiastic breakfast or a call up and she wasn't very keen on showing off her girl naked. Chloe moved a little mumbling something softly and cuddled closer, awakening another loving smile. Rachel couldn't wait for them having their own place and experience more mornings like this one, although she wasn't that sure if they would pick Long Beach as their final destination anymore. It didn't feel like home. Future or present.

The fast, familiar steps in the deep, soft carpet of the hallway confirmed her wary suspicions.

She was halfway through the cig when James Amber opened the door to the bedroom, fully dressed and prepared to confront the world. Judging by the perfect suit and carefully combed hair he was rushing to a business meeting not a friendly reunion. He was about to say something, probably short and sweet, but gasped and froze in place looking at them both.

Rachel didn't blush this time.

Father and daughter watched each other for a long moment. He didn't move and inch, when she released a long twirl of smoke, serving a playful smirk and still caressing the blue locks of her girl, not even pretending that she was wearing anything under the cover. He didn't say a word seeing the handcuffs still tied to the bed frame and the black lace on the floor. Challenging him with a bold gaze, his daughter, his little baby daughter, not so little and certainly not innocent anymore, released another whirl of tobacco greyness through her half open lips without a single blink. Take that, dad.

It was his fault that he didn't knock.

James Amber took a deep breath and slowly retreated, closing the door quietly, leaving Rachel in the loving embrace of her girlfriend and the grey burn.
Kelly Davis was hanging over her chair, still with her hands tied by the dark tape behind her back. Her eyes were peacefully closed, her lips a tad open, but her favorite, stolen blue shirt wasn't even touched with a single wave of breath.

Kelly Davis wasn't breathing. She was getting cold and rigid, in the stiffness of life that escaped a few hours ago, now leaving a fake touch of heat. She would be cold soon. Not a person, not an experiment, not a scream in the dark, but just a memory. A memory that would haunt them both.

The transformation went wrong.

Everything went wrong.

"What have you done?" Mark Jefferson looked at Nathan with pure, raw wrath. "What have you done, you useless, retarded piece of shit?" He got up off his knees and suddenly threw one of the tripods, trash ing it over the wall. The expensive piece of equipment landed on the floor with a loud rumble, battered and unusable. Dead.

Young Prescott took a few steps back, shaking, trembling, terrified.

"I don't know what happened!" He cried sharply. "I gave her the same dose as usual. I don't know why she is… like that."

He hoped that it was just a joke, a prank. Freshmen liked pranks, right? Maybe she would just open her eyes in a second, maybe she was just playing with them. Nathan Prescott hoped so badly for her to abruptly start yelling, accusing them of kidnaping or any other terrible crime, get furious, get angry, calling them names. Anything, he would give anything for one single move.

Kelly Davis wasn't moving.

"Leave." Jefferson's hands were shaking a little bit. He wasn't nervous though, just purely angry. "Leave now!" He yelled, seeing that Nathan didn't move an inch. "Get out!"

***

The balance switched completely. Chloe, who woke up in a great mood, was way more talkative and blunt than the day before, but James Amber kept his thoughts to himself, barely mumbling a word. Rachel couldn't be happier with the change, seeing her girl overcoming the fears of the previous day. Some handcuffs and loud moans last night might’ve also helped a little with the sudden adjustment, worked even better than she had assumed. It was always strange to see her girl all dressed up, covered with clothes just after, like nothing had happened. It was hard not to recall how damn hot she looked stripped off.

When Chloe reached for the corn syrup, Rachel looked at her with such passion, that it stopped her girl in half-move, captivated and stunned, and it would lead to something dangerously fervent again, if James didn't choke loudly, breaking them apart.

"So, we're thinking…" Rose started slowly filling their cups with coffee. "… that we could spend the
morning at the beach and enjoy the weather, and then we can drive to the city and Santa Monica to show Chloe the pier."

Chloe added five spoons of sugar to her drink and grinned, responding to James' questioning gaze. He hid himself behind a newspaper, whistling with the pages loudly.

"Sight-seeing?" Rachel almost forgot that some people had never seen Sunset Boulevard and blinked in surprise. "Why not? I'm sure Chloe would like to see some stars."

"Oh, I would love to." Her bold, wild pirate was back, smirking mischievously. Rose sighed deeply. Rachel choked. Chloe, encouraged by the recent events, absolutely didn't mind helping her recall some nasty, dirty things they had done a few hours ago.

Asking for another pillow seemed so innocent right now.

Alright, Rachel was grateful for the big comeback, but maybe not in front of her breakfast. And her parents. Chloe, stop, Chloe, please don't stop. Oh, damn.

She bit her lip.

"I've rescheduled the yacht trip for tomorrow." James Amber finally put his newspaper away, folding it in half. "I'm expecting some phone calls today and I have to be available for a meeting, so..."

His wife shook her head, evidently disappointed. Rachel knew her parents very well and was sure that they had discussed his accessibility at least a hundred times before. Apparently, another promise just got broken.

"It's fine, dad. Don't worry about us." She got back to her toast and eggs, trying to smooth it down. "We will be fine. But... It would be nice if you could join us." Rachel said quietly, and it tempered his firm gaze, softened him up.

Rose smiled gratefully.

So, James Amber joined them on the lazy afternoon and watched them more than closely through his shades, when they joked around, played with the waves and enjoyed the heat and the sun draft. The water was cold, her girl looked hot in her blue bikini and Rachel couldn't ask for anything more, seeing her careless smile. Oh, well except a make-out session on the wet sand like in those cheesy sunscreen commercials but she didn't want to cross another line, so a splash of water would have to be enough to cool them down.

It was the same ocean, but somehow different under California's sun.

When they finally lied down on the beach towels, with skin still garlanded with the drops of salty water, Chloe looked at her in this dreamy, soft way again and was about to say something but then gave up in the last moment, wiping the ocean's splinters from her face and smiling doubtfully.

Rachel kept wondering what this big secret was about.

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"So, is this your childhood?" Chloe sighed looking at the Kodak theatre, just after taking another
souvenir photo. She wanted to play it cool, but this part of the trip woke up her inner curious tourist. Pictures, key-chains, snapbacks and t-shirts were provided by the brand-new credit card. Rachel loved to spoil her, even if it meant they would have to buy another suitcase before getting back.

"Congratulations, Amber. You finally brought me here. Short-term but still counts. So that's what you've been missing?"

"Yeah." Rachel nodded, wincing at the last name stage. Chloe dropped this custom a long time ago, but it was painfully fitting now. "Well, not exactly. You don't really come here often if you live in the city. It's a special treatment for important guests." For years she had thought the first time they would both visit this place was when they ran away. A romantic escapade had changed into a tourist attraction now. It wasn't bad, it was just... so ordinary. Rachel brushed this thought off quickly and walked a few steps forward, opening her arms and turning back to Chloe. "So, what do you think? Charmed by Los Angeles already?"

"Sorry LA, I'm already taken." The blue tourist winked and lit up a smoke, looking around. "I imagined it differently though."

She never thought that this place would be so filled with people, especially screaming kids and foreign languages. Los Angeles always was their fantasy, an achievable dream but the reality surprised her the most by its ordinal normality. The buildings looked so small and weary, the streets were as dirty as the ones in her home town, the hot dogs tasted like shit in comparison and even if she was excited to see more of the city of angels, she really couldn't picture herself here permanently.

Unless one particular angel would ask.

"I know what you mean." Rachel stole a drag of her smoke. "Funny." She added, looking at her parents who patiently were waiting for them, with the typical grimace of the locals who had to show overrated wonders.

"What?"

"Ah, you're gonna laugh." The blonde hair twirled in sun, when she tilted her head. "I miss your room. Our room. I miss home."

This confession in the middle of the Hollywood walk of fame, between the granite stars and yelling crowd, melted Chloe's heart into pure liquid gold. She grabbed her arm and dragged her closer for a short, forehead kiss, so tired of being careful around James and Rose. They got so used to freedom that avoiding a usual kiss felt unnatural and phony. Some guy on the street whistled at them though so he got the finger. Rachel laughed out loud, surrounding Chloe's waist with her arm and making yet another statement. Hand holding wasn't enough.

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It would be a sin not to test drive this Jeep, since it was obviously a gift for Rachel and they both wouldn't mind breaking free for a moment. Rose didn't mind, and James had to get back to his very important business meetings and calls. Chloe, climbing onto the cabin, realized that the car was one of the famous bribes her girl rejected, refusing to move to Long Beach and staying with her instead.

She rejected so much just for Chloe Price.

"Ready for Santa Monica pier, baby?" Rachel smirked when the engine started to purr slowly. It
took her a while to get used to this ride and it was a way different experience than with her vintage Mustang. She almost wanted Chloe to drive, but her blue pirate and the Los Angeles streets combined would be a touch too much.

"Uh-huh." Her girl stretched, putting her legs on the dashboard, not even intimidated by the fact that it was brand new, and enjoyed the ride under the bright California sun hiding behind her new sunglasses. Rachel smirked at how much her girl looked like a freaking edgy rock star now.

They hadn't gotten out from the neighborhood populated with rich mansions and beautiful gardens when Chloe asked calmly: "Can you please stop somewhere?"

"Why? Are you ok?" Rachel frowned and pulled over on the side of the narrow street. "Is everything alright?" She asked, puzzled and confused, hoping that the amount of eaten hot dogs weren't the main problem and wouldn't destroy their plans for the evening.

Chloe immediately unfastened her seatbelt, took her shades off and grabbed Rachel's shirt, pulling close for a long, slow kiss. It got impatient and rough pretty fast but changed the direction slowly with a nip to Rachel's bottom lip, with a dancing tongue sneaking inside and yanking the blond hair lightly. It was more than wanted and the fragile small driver was very strong when desperate, almost dragging her to sit on her lap. Almost, because this damn car wasn't so forgiving and understandable for that kind of action.

"Now it is." Chloe murmured between the kisses.

"Devil." Rachel hummed and even if she wanted to be serious and composed, she couldn't stop herself from another one. And another, deeper, hotter, more possessive. "More…" She whispered unaware that the words escaped her lips. The whole day she was handcuffed to her obligations, locked in her family duties and couldn't kiss her like that, couldn't feel her close.

It was indeed a pure torture.

She got that much more that Santa Monica pier almost got forgotten. They got there eventually though, even if the test drive changed into a test stand on the main highway most of the time. One more reason why Chloe Price and Los Angeles didn't really like each other, but mercifully she wasn't asked to.

"What happened to your bracelet?" She murmured caressing Rachel's wrist while they were walking through the famous promenade. Chloe didn't even know why she asked about this blue band, forgetting about it entirely and never questioning its disappearance, but thinking about certain treasures her mind wandered there regardless.

Rachel got stiff immediately.

"I don't wear it anymore." She just answered quickly, trying not to look at her and focusing on the ocean waves below. The seagulls' squeaks seemed like a mocking song. She knew very well where this piece was, but it was way too late to dig this issue out. Rachel wanted the bracelet to rot,
wherever it was stashed now.

"Too many bad memories?" Chloe's question blended in with one of the sea birds' scream. Her hand drifted to her pocket again, wondering if this pier, this city was actually the best place. Maybe she should delay it, wait for a better circumstance, better occasion. Less birds and people, more candles and stuff like that. She could lead her down the stairs though, it would happen on the beach, in the red light of the California sunset. Romantic, right? It's supposed to be romantic.

"That too." Rachel tightened the grasp of their intertwined fingers, trading her focus from the waves to her steps. Her converse got so dirty after the whole day of the city walk. "The bracelet had so much meaning to me when I didn't know who gave it to me and why. After all that shit, after what my father did and Sera leaving me with him, it was more wicked than good."

It wasn't a lie. She wouldn't give it away so easily, if this damn bracelet was still important, but she hadn't had a choice. It had been a demand, a violent and harsh request. Frank wanted a proof of her commitment, of her dedication and that was the only thing she had left. The only thing she could give up, without falling apart. She had fallen apart anyway. Rachel closed her eyes.

The wooden boards of the pier were creaking lightly with every step.

"But you kept it for years regardless…" Chloe was damn stubborn. It wasn't important, but she subconsciously felt the need to learn more about the bracelet. It seemed somehow connected to their next big step. Rachel's reaction was understandable but also weird and distant, like another lie.

They were honest with each other, right? She wouldn't hide shit.

"I did." Rachel's hand got sweaty a little bit, her fingers curled awkwardly. "Mostly because I wasn't motivated to take it off."

They kept walking in silence, still holding hands, just like many couples before and after. Chloe breathed heavily thinking about the stairs, the beach and the sunset. The daylight was dying so fast, reminding her that it was time to make a decision. Rachel cleared her throat battling over her own thoughts. This trip, this moment was so precious, she didn't want to ruin it with another unpleasant memory, another nasty reminder.

What's past is past, like her father said, right?

"Remember when we first kissed?" Chloe saved her again, and Rachel looked at her with a pure relief. The sunset was glowing around her blue hair, creating a bleeding aureole. Her own fucking saint.

"Yeah, I do." She ignored the damn bird, smiling to her memories. "One adorable super tall dork trying to express her wishes in the middle of the street and me so damn nervous she didn't mean it. Yeah, I remember."

Chloe's thumb was caressing her ring finger, then moved up to the top of her palm almost reaching the wrist again.

"That night you asked what it would take to convince me…" The blue rebel smiled shyly. "I was seriously considering asking you for this bracelet."

"I would give it to you in a heartbeat."
The kiss was unforgettable, but her life would be so easy if the bracelet landed on Chloe's wrist three
years ago. She wouldn't have to trudge through uncomfortable semi-truths, half lies and everything
that was forgotten on purpose.

"Really?" Those blue eyes could be so innocent. So freaking naïve. "It was very important to you.
Then."

"And you also were and are very important to me. Then. And now." Rachel stated firmly. "Why are
you asking?" Was it a vile trap or was Chloe just simply curious? Damn you, baby, why did you
have to ask? Why did you have to go there…?

It was hard to walk on this pier and not stumble over the breaks between the wooden planks.

"I don't know. I was just wondering what happened to it. I haven't seen it on your wrist since...
Chloe tried to remember, and then shrugged simply. "Yeah, since we got back together."

She didn't trip even once.

Suddenly Rachel stopped her in place, putting her palms on her chest, slowly smoothing the shirt's
fabric. Her fingers brushed the necklace, played with the bullets. Chloe's heart broke its steady
rhythm. Fuck. She knew. Rachel knew. She suspected something was going on and she would stop
her here and now. Perhaps she never wanted to be asked, maybe it was a stupid idea, maybe her
parents and the whole trip made her rethink a few things.

"Yeah... Chloe... I..." Gathering all the scraps of her bravery, Rachel was almost ready to confess, to
tell her the truth, to actually solve this issue, uncover another ugly truth. The bracelet was gone, she
would never get it back. He had it now. It didn't mean shit, but he had it.

Frank.

The cotton candy smelled too sweet. It was almost nauseating.

Chloe didn't want to hear this. She wouldn't be able to stand the rejection.

"Do you think about Sera sometimes?" Another switch, another surprise. It took Rachel off guard,
she stomped over her declaration, almost ready, but the courage disappeared within the dying
daylight.

"Sometimes." She answered slowly, still suspecting a deception. "It's my mother. Technically. I
know she really wanted to see me, to connect with me, but then she bailed out not even caring what
was going on. Some sort of trouble and she disappeared into thin air."

Her girlfriend fed on the fresh, ocean gust. She remembered the weird conversation with Rachel's
mother very well even if her vision had been blurry and had been experiencing the worst headache in
her life.

"She wanted you to have the father you deserve."

"She couldn't be more mistaken." It was a painful topic. Way more painful than Chloe could
presume. Rachel turned away her gaze. "That's partly why I don't care about her and about this
bracelet anymore. My mother's wish was just bullshit and I followed her steps anyway."

She wanted to continue the walk, but it was her pirate's turn to make her stay. A soft, tender touch on
her forehead brushing off her hair, making it better, perfect.
"Don't say it..."

"It's true." Rachel shrugged coldly. "There is no reason to shy over it. I got in fucking trouble, into drugs, into... other things just like her. But Sera didn't have something that I had..." She added with a fragile smile, but the corners of her lips were trembling.

"Luck?"

She took a deep breath, still tense and edgy. Damn, this blue wonder really was clueless sometimes. So damn oblivious, but also adorable in her ignorance. It was sometimes annoying, maddening and frustrating but she couldn't imagine sharing her life with anybody else.

Damn, she would marry her right now and right here if possible.

"Sera didn't have this stubborn, crazy pirate by her side who would sacrifice everything just to get her back. Who would forgive her and take care of her instead of just throwing hush money in her direction. So yeah, I'm luckier..." She got kissed in the middle of the beautiful love confession. "What was that for?" She kept Chloe in place by her shirt, not letting her get away murdering the rest of her words without an explanation. The dreamy blue smile appeared again.

Interesting.

"For luck." Chloe smirked, feeling how her own courage was waving her goodbye and pulling off, leaving her emptyhanded with some unspoken question and big plans. "Let's get back home." She whispered.

***

He didn't seem to notice them when they parked with a provoking engine drill and got out slamming the doors loudly. Sitting on his plastic chair and eating something from a simple metal can, Frank ignored their presence even when they stood in front of him, floundering in mud and sludge. Victoria shifted nervously, not used to such oblivious treatment, but the drug dealer couldn't care less. Nathan, exceptionally withdrawn and distant again, didn't say a single word, following her more as a shadow than as a friend. Thank you so much, Prescott, you useless piece of shit.

"What do you want?" Frank asked, chewing another bite of his meal, still not lifting his head and welcoming them only with a confederate flag on his baseball cap instead of his reddish, watery eyes. Victoria noticed he was already drunk, even if the day barely reached high noon.

"Some information." She responded loudly, straightening up. She wanted to take another step forward, but this dog of his growled in warning, still laying by Frank's feet. Stupid, dirty animal.

Frank shrugged. "Not interested." And he got back to his can, apparently more interesting than the representation of Blackwell Academy's elite.

Victoria peered at Nathan, hoping for some kind of gallant reaction, but he was just looking at his dirty shoes with hands bulking his pocket, as interested in keeping this conversation going as the famous owner of the dirtiest RV in Oregon.

Fine. She would have to do it herself. As always.
"Listen," Crossing her arms on her chest was always making her feel more confident. "Your business depends on the school and I'm the one that can make it harder ok? Just answer some questions, get paid and answer some and we will be fine."

Mentioning green papers decorated with dead presidents' portraits got Frank's attention. He looked at them finally, then at Nathan, then at her again. Victoria shifted nervously, annoyed by the pile of mud covering her shoes. Everything about this guy was dirty, even his favorite parking spot.

"What kind of questions?" Frank murmured, still chewing. "What do you want to know?"

Finally, thank God. Victoria relaxed a bit. That kind of scum thought about one thing only and fortunately her wallet was filled with cash. She had to touch her savings account though, but preferred to be prepared for any kind of reasonable sum, instead of leaving in half-word looking for an ATM.

"What do you know about Sera Gearhardt?"

The question hung in the air like an unpleasant smell, a stinky reminder of old, bad times. Frank kept watching her for a moment, squinting his eyes in the morning sun. Victoria could swear he was wondering how much the answer was worth.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's personal." She rose her eyebrow, trying to be as professional and mysterious as possible. Nathan sighed lightly, ruining the impression, but the drunk asshole probably didn't notice. Good.

"Personal, huh?" Frank rose from his chair, cleaning his teeth with his tongue with an obnoxious, abhorrent sound. "What kind of personal?"

"It's about Rachel. Rachel Amber."

The dog barked twice and started growing again. Frank scratched his arm, then sniffled loudly. He looked at his beast, calming the dog down with one careful look. Well-trained, at least one of them. Victoria smiled wickedly. Frank apparently didn't like this bitch as much as her.

"Take your money and get the fuck out." He said slowly, surprising her completely. "I ain't gonna tell you shit."

He walked a few steps forward, forcing her to back off a little. A cold shiver went through her spine, when their gazes crossed. The dog growled again, still hidden under the plastic, shaky table. Frank might be drunk, his moves wobbly, but still dangerous. Nathan was right, it was a mistake to confront him alone, it was a mistake to even come here.

It was too late to backtrack though.

"Remember about your business, Bowers." She stated, still trying to be reasonable.

"My business?" Frank chortled but then got serious again. "You think you two can do anything about my business? Blackwell needs me and my sweet candy more than I need them. They will come to me anyway, with your permission or not. You want to make my life harder? Fine. But I can make your life harder too, bitch." A knife opened in his hand with a fast metal sizzle.

Victoria went pale.

Suddenly Nathan's eyes grew bigger, like he just woke up from a long, peaceful dream. He jumped
in front of her, trying to shield her from the sharp edge and unstable drunk dickhead. So reluctant and silent before, he transformed into a gracious protector. She couldn't be more grateful, but the situation was still scaring her to death. Literally.

"Get away from her, you fucking piece of trash." Nathan hissed with such anger and wrath that Frank almost lost his balance taking a step back. Victoria, still astonished with the turn of the evens, lost her game entirely not sure if she should run to her car or wait for a sweet victory instead.

Both possible outcomes seemed fucking terrible.

"Easy, you fucking punk." Frank grasped the knife firmer. This dickhead wanted a fight? Fine with him. "I can cut you too, rich daddy or not. Don't get into my business, don't ask around about Sera or Rachel. Now or never. Do you understand me?"

The dog started to bark like crazy.

The shiny steel edge was a few inches from Nathan's face, but he didn't care or didn't want to notice. Standing still gained him a few points of respect from this creepy scumbag. Victoria wished their drug dealer could be a way nicer person, like in the movies, not a despicable outcast that everybody hated. That kind who didn't threaten his best clients with a knife, for example.

"She was using you the whole fucking time, you fucking retard." A cold smirk of a spoiled brat rose the corners of Nathan's lips. "She didn't give a shit about you."

For a moment Victoria was sure Frank would cross the line and spill the blood. She swallowed hard looking at the silent brawl, a super bowl of testosterone. Frank was older and way stronger, but heavily hammered. Nathan, on the other hand, could be very threatening when livid.

The drug dealer almost gave up, lowering the knife, but still not hiding it. His fingers were trembling a little bit, maybe looking for the switch on the handle. It was uneasy to play with a weapon while drunk.

"You don't know shit, Prescott." Frank started slowly, with his speech more mumbling. "You don't know shit. You're just a little pissy boy that doesn't even shave yet. I can shave you, alright?" The knife appeared again, now aimed at Nathan's throat. Victoria saw him swallowing in surprise. "And don't you even dare to mention Rachel. You are not even fucking worth it to talk about her!"

He pushed Nathan. Maybe it was an accident, maybe a planned act, but it drove young Prescott crazy. Absolutely fucking mad. Ignoring the knife and the fact that he could just end his precious life in mud and filth on Oregon's hidden road, he pushed him back with full force ready for a real fight.

The dog started to bark like crazy again but didn't jump on them. Yet.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you." He yelled. Bark. Bark. Bark. He also started barking. Frank's eyes grew bigger. Victoria choked in shock and grabbed her friend's arm in the last moment. Nathan was struggling for a moment, almost hit her, but she had to keep him in place. This was wild. It was way too wild.

Woof. Woof. Woof. He almost howled.

The drug dealer gasped. Victoria opened her mouth in shock. Even the dog shut the fuck up. What the hell got into Nathan? What the hell happened?

It took them a moment to find the sane balance again.
"Yeah, kill me, good joke." The Frank laughed coldly, but hid his knife, shaking his head. This whole shit was going too far. He was tired, so damn fucking tired. He forgot about Rachel for a couple of hours and those stupid, insane motherfuckers had to remind him of her. Reminded of how shitty his life was.

Rachel.

Pompidou growled again, also surprised by this madness.

"Nathan, let's go." Victoria whispered to his friend's ear, trying to put him at ease. "It's not the right time. It's fine. Let's go."

Young Prescott calmed down as rapidly as he went mad. He just nodded sharply, and turned around, forgetting about Frank, the RV, the dog, barking and Rachel. Victoria blinked a few times, trying to absorb what actually had happened, but getting back to the dorm was more important than analyzing everything right now.

"Get the fuck out. Both of you. Now, or my dog will fucking rip off your fucking throats. Fucking kids." Frank spat with a loud, obnoxious grunt seeing them leaving. "Fucking, stupid kids." He murmured sitting back on his plastic chair and getting back to his canned meal.

***

The house felt empty and uninhibited with the lights off and snuggled only with the whisper of the upcoming waves. The beach shore was drowning in the darkness when the fake waters of the swimming pool were shimmering in the underwater lights, creating fragile flashes of a blue illumination.

Chloe needed a solid dose of tranquility.

She snuck out of the bedroom, leaving Rachel in her slumber, tired after the whole day of explorations and undertakings. It was almost a sin leaving her angel abandoned, but Chloe really wanted to smoke, not being able to fall into a dream of her own. Tobacco wouldn't be a perfect lullaby, but it was worth a try. Torn between obligations, respectfulness, questions and answers the blue pirate wanted to be alone with her thoughts. The whole expensive trip stripped her out of her own luxury - her own space and time.

"I prefer you to smoke in bed instead of leaving me alone." She heard and turned back meeting a cocky smile and a hazel wink. Apparently, Chloe wasn't the only one who felt uncomfortable finding herself lonely between the sheets. They both were too addicted to each other's warmth.

Rachel, dressed up only in her flannel that she probably grabbed last minute not to parade through the whole residency naked, stole a gasp of her smoke, not keen on getting her own. The cigarette was just an excuse though, to get closer and snuggle in her arms again. The water was playing with the vivid blue shadows, dancing on her cheeks, temples and lips, creating a halo of mystery.

"I'm sorry." Chloe smiled brushing the blond hair gently. "I didn't want to wake you up."

"You did anyway, taking away my favorite pillow." Her girl poked her chest explicitly showing what she preferred to lay her head on. "I'm happy you did though."
Holding her closer made Chloe question why she had left the bed in the first place. Leaning over the wall and avoiding dark eyes of tall windows, she kept smoking with a steady pace, with Rachel's head on her shoulder and her heartbeat loud enough to be heard through the red flannel. She closed her eyes, feeling the soft touch of the fingers on her forehead.

"You really like my longer hair."

"I like the changes that… happen naturally. Just like us." Rachel's smile changed from kind to devilish. "Not to mention that there's more for me to pull. Speaking of pulling…” She started to unbutton her shirt slowly, and then taking a few steps back, let it fall from her arms uncovering everything.

"Jesus, Rach, what about your parents?" Chloe gasped wondering if James Amber had security cameras around the pool and if so, how often he was reviewing the footage.

Rachel rolled her eyes, clothed only with the flickering lights of the swimming pool.

"I would gladly appreciate if you didn't mention them every time I'm about to do dirty things with you. It ruins the mood a little bit. And my parents are freaking asleep." Devil changed to angel again when her fingers rubbed Chloe's arm. Some sin was in order. "Fancy a midnight swim?"

For a second Rachel was hella certain that her girl would refuse, excusing herself not feeling comfortable enough with the possible encounter with the owners of this house, especially in the middle of a passionate moment. If she was afraid of her parents the night before, this was way riskier. On the other hand, who would refuse?

"Let me guess." Chloe killed the smoke, making her mind up already. "I'm gonna agree or you're just gonna push me into the pool?"

"It's an option I truly considered, yes." Rachel started to walk into the water already. Her fingers were playing on the steel railing when she was slowly taking step after step into the abyss. When the water covered her up to the waist, she finally turned to Chloe and smiled. Damn, beautiful alluring siren. "I don't want you to miss this opportunity to swim naked in the pool at night." She whispered, leaving her lips partly open when the last word echoed in the glistening silence.

There was something magical with the shimmering waters, floating blue lights and the calm and peaceful ocean's song playing in the background. Magical enough that Chloe, instead of taking off everything fast and making it as quick as possible, forgot about all the dangers, deciding to make it painfully slow, smooth and seductive, long tempting gaze and bold smirk included.

Rachel was watching her with her eyes narrowed.

"I did it once." The blue pirate walked into the pool although even if she tried to be all charming and inviting, her body jerked while touching the cold waves. All the seductive effort went to shit. "Almost. Kinda." She confessed, wincing at the freeze. "With Max. We broke into the school and we had some swimming thing going on."

Rachel's eyelids fluttered in a sudden blink. "Naked? With Max?"

"Jealous again?" Chloe swam closer and caught her in a soft embrace, taming the green-eyed fire with a soft nose brush. "It was hella innocent, I wasn't naked, and I didn't do this." She kissed her slowly. "And this." And she did it again.

"Yeah, I know." Rachel murmured, still with a seductive smile, but her possessive nature forced her to grumble more. "You saved that for later."
The fake sea splashed lightly, when Chloe got closer, putting her in place not hiding her intentions. She had to be careful though, her girl was still afraid of deep waters. Rachel's gaze was still challenging, still impish, but she gladly let her to take over.

"I would gladly appreciate you not mentioning Max when I'm about to do dirty things with you in this pool." Seductive Chloe was rare, a true blue diamond. Rachel ate her own moan. "It ruins the mood. Plus, if you really want to know…" Her hand was traveling through her thigh, hip, danced on her waist.

"Yeah?" Rachel winked, almost forgetting about her fear of swimming.

"The only thing I had on my mind then..." Chloe's fingers went up to her chest, played with one nipple. "Was how much I wanted you to be there…" Then the other once, since it got lonely. "With me." The blue eyes looked directly at her. "How much you would enjoy the cold Blackwell waters with breaking and entering. I'm not gonna lie…" She buried her lips in her neck, kissing slowly. "I missed you like crazy."

They both knew it wasn't a lie.

Protectiveness was Chloe's second name and she gently pushed them both closer to the marble shore. She didn't want her mermaid to get scared, on the contrary. Carrying her and wandering through the waves instead of awkwardly, made the embrace more intimate. They reached the edge of the swimming pool slowly, watchful not to hit it carelessly. A few more moments and they would stop being that careful.

"I'm here now," said Rachel, not taking her eyes away from her. Feeling Chloe's hand on her neck and slowly traveling up and touching her earring, she lifted her chin in a challenging dare. "Take it off. It's pretty fragile and went through a lot. I don't want to risk ruining it completely."

It didn't happen very often, and Chloe was never asked to do it before. She took off the earring very, very slowly, and carefully put it on the shore, as far away from the edge as she could reach. Rachel lowered her eyes, somehow shy in her new kind of nakedness. Without her signature mark she was even more Chloe's.

"All naked." Her girl whispered in awe, tracing the line of her ear, her chin, and delicately brushing her lips with her thumb. Her fingertips were getting wrinkled from the water. "All mine."

Rachel kept her hand in place, kissed the fingers and slid it slowly to her chest, just to make her feel her heartbeat again, not covered by any damn flannel. Her pulse was getting faster, but not in a crazy pace, in a wonderful anticipation not impatient need. Not yet anyway.

"Chloe…" The whisper was barely perceptible. Rachel wanted to tell her so much about the bracelet, about everything that had gone wrong, uncover the rest of the secrets with one long and breathless confession, but she kept losing herself in the blue desire, exchanging the uncomfortable past for a tempting present.

"Rach…" Chloe couldn't stop watching her, couldn't get enough. If that wasn't the romantic moment, what was it? But the important part of the big question was upstairs in her pocket, in the bedroom, way out of her grasp. Rachel's lips were so close, partly open, waiting for them to drown in a kiss. She was getting summoned with every silent inhale and whisper of the quivering water.

The temptation was swallowing them fast enough to forget about all the words and questions. They didn't want to let go of this chance missing other opportunities completely, melting in the underwater lights and their own slow touches, wary and fearless at the same time.
Rachel narrowed her eyes covered only by waves of chlorine and pulled her closer for a deep, hard kiss, done with waiting. She was stealing her memories, all the moments she couldn't be a part of and making them better, more substantial, more passionate. Chloe was drowning deeper and deeper in her caress, pierced and electrocuted by getting more power, taking control, getting wild. Electricity was never a good idea in the water though. It could be damn dangerous.

She pushed her harder, pinned to the wall.

It was so easy to get intoxicated, however she should stay unaffected. Blue was her color for crying out loud, but Chloe was done with resisting, on the contrary. She wished the handcuffs were within reach when wrapping Rachel's leg around her own waist, opening more. Her girl licked Chloe's lower lip, sucked on it a little, and then threw her head back in a sharp moan, melting, asking for more, dividing herself between want and need. The blue pirate grinned impishly. That was what she loved to see. So resistant the night before, she changed into her own opposite, taming her girl, her own siren, teasing slowly and feeding on the loud sounds of impatience. She became firmer, more direct as much as Rachel's body tensed, cold and hot at the same time. Her longer hair got pulled, tangled with a desperate grasp of fingers, when her girl pleaded for another kiss.

"Easy there." Chloe whispered, noticing how forcefully she was holding onto her arms, greedy for more touches, creating new waves with every moan. "Ready for some heaven?"

"Save the heaven…" Rachel whispered back just before being kissed deeply as the next ocean wave hit the shore. "…Ride an angel." She wasn't even pretending that the ending would be silent.

It wasn't silent at all.

***

The last day welcomed them all with the same weather, the same cloudless sky and the same tension, but they could count the hours to their flight to Portland, both missing their own bed and own space. This trip helped them both to define what home meant and it was an important lesson, even if sometimes painful, erasing some of the dreams, confronting them with the harsh reality.

Chloe had to admit she got used to California's sun, the white beach, midnight swimming sessions and silk sheets in the bed with a metal frame, along with a certain blond girl who was just lying by her side, enjoying the heat of the high noon. The yacht trip was dope, but they couldn't get a single moment alone, locked down on a limited space with James and Rose. Rachel kidnaped her to the beach just after lunch and it was hella appreciated.

"Are you gonna seduce me on my parent's beach?" Her blond devil murmured, feeling her hand traveling between the folds of her shirt, tracing slowly the pattern of fabric stitches. Along with other things of course.

The flannel still smelled like swimming pool, but they didn't mind.

Chloe Price, the confirmed world traveler didn't respond instantly. Touching button after button, she knew that the wonders underneath could be discovered just with a simple pull. She couldn't draw the map right now though, keeping the land as a secret, but a few more hours and there would be no obstacles before a far-reaching expedition.

"Would you mind?"
Rachel squinted her eyes blinded by the sunrays, peering at her blue adventurer, suddenly so subtle with her usually gallant voyages.

"Whatever you want, Chloe. I'm surrendering to your pirate power." It was so theatrical that they both had to giggle. "What does your heart or other organs strive for?"

Chloe got silent for a moment, playing with the buttons, circling around them, levering them one by one, almost prying open, but leaving untouched and switching to another one. Rachel tangled her hair in the rakish, playful way, not really rushing for an answer.

"I want this to never end." The pirate conqueror finally answered, startlingly cautiously. The notorious land could be sometimes so unknown and mysterious. She had to be careful and wary, prepared for hidden coal rocks and whirls of unfortunate circumstances.

Rachel didn't have to ask to know that this statement wasn't about California or their trip even. There was only one thing Chloe could have in mind.

"It doesn't have to end." She smiled, covering her eyes in the shadow of her palm. "I don't want this to end either and it won't end as long as I fucking breathe. I don't care about any of this." Her hand briefly waved at the house, glowing in the morning sunlight. "I just want you."

Chloe was done with the buttons, not tracing the shape of the collar. Her bullet necklace touched Rachel's arm for a second in a pleasant cold ring.

"Are you that addicted to my poor punk ass?"

"Oh, yeah. I am. What, are you surprised?" Rachel frowned and laughed loudly. "Now you are surprised! Oh, for fuck's sake, I have a clueless girlfriend." She stopped Chloe's hand when it wandered to her neck, keeping it in place. "Is that too much?" Repeating how much she wanted it to be permanent was sometimes too courageous even for her blue pirate.

"No. It's not. It's perfect…” Chloe gestured weakly, her dreamy smile appeared again, this time in full force. "It's just a lot of things to sacrifice and…”

Rachel scoffed but looking into those trustful eyes she melted under the blue gaze. Sometimes a moment like that happened, a moment that she would never like to be done with, living it over and over, without rest, food or a single move. This was one of them. One of many, but special somehow.

"So vulnerable… So mine." Rachel whispered in awe, brushing the blue hair and competing with the ocean gust who would do it better. She was so freaking in love that it should be illegal.

It was the moment that Chloe, the valiant pirate had been waiting for. Perhaps the scenery could be a tad better, maybe the sand could be warmer, the sun less bright, the ocean waves less distracting, but it was fine, it was good, because Rachel was here. Some treasure chests were already prepared, and the land already conquered. Why not take the next step and build a goddamn fort then?

"Rachel…” She murmured, looking at her girl stretching to the sun. She moved closer to be able to whisper it in her ear, to touch her earring. Touch her.

"Yeah?"

"I'm… Would you… I mean…” Should she cut to the chase, or elaborate? Damn, Rachel probably imagined it differently, something more dramatic, more epic. The earring was so soft under her fingers, bending with its feather to every single touch.
"Yeah?"

"I... I think I should kneel or something." Was it wise to stand up now? Or asking her to stand up? Should they both get up first, or just forget about this weird ritual and let it happen naturally? Just like them.

"Huh?"

Chloe was almost there, her lips were open, the words prepared, the sails filled with the wind of fresh courage, but then something stopped her. A nervous gasp made Rachel frown.

"Oh damn, I have a clueless girlfriend." Her blue treasure whispered, when her smile was cutting the words in half.

"What are you talking about?" Rachel looked at her completely baffled and then she abruptly got up, brushing off the sand, hearing someone calling her name. "Oh shit, my mom asked if I could go for a walk with her. Behave, relax, and don't do anything..."

The hope got broken with a crash of an ocean wave. Just like one particular blue pirate, the sweep of water attacked the shore with a brave billow and left emptyhanded.

"...That I would normally do?" Chloe rolled over her back, covering her face in her hands. No courage was in need now, the tension could irreversibly leave her body, but the bittersweet disappointment was scratching her chest with everything that could have happened.

"No, that would get you in trouble." Rachel covered the sun for a moment, gifting her the peaceful shadow. "I don't want you in trouble." She smirked and vanished from the landscape quickly, running back to the house and her family duties.

Finger guns were Chloe's painful reminder of what a farewell to her plans tasted like.

***

You fucked up.

Kelly was smiling on the photos he took a few days before. Her blond hair always storming around, always unruly, always crossing paths with her lips and eyes, making her real expression a secret. Always so trustful, always so full of life. Nathan loved the long blond hair, he loved touching them, brushing them lightly. A golden star alive. It was so hard to see this gem covered by a cold synthetic bag, with the rustling blue plastic. Packed and prepared for delivery to nowhere.

You fucked up.

The lizard tattoo on a lifeless hand, on a wrist without a pulse. The eyes without stars, without sparkles, without meaning. The latest set of black and white photos, an art, a revival that ended in limbo. No response to the flash, no answer to his orders, his supposed power. Kelly was freer on her last photos that he would ever be. She was done. He would never be done.

"You fucked up." Nathan whispered and broke down in a sharp cry.
The Los Angeles harbor was preparing for the nightshift with the loud shouts of signal horns, welcoming the boats, ships and vessels, shielding them from the upcoming darkness of the night. The tall cranes moved slowly in a leisurely dance, like long industrial fingers on the horizon, shadowing the landscape of warehouses and mountains of colorful metal containers, patiently bending to the orders of tiny figurines of workers in yellow helmets. This view should be odd and bizarre but somehow it felt fitting and peaceful in the light of the upcoming sunset.

Rachel smiled at the festival of spotlights and reflectors slowly coming to life and decorating the skyline with its blinking impertinence. She always loved the view, reminding her of her own childhood even if it had meant the day was over and it was time to get back home. Now, she couldn't be happier with the same message.

"How is everything, mom?" She asked when the pace of their steps equalized to the same steady rhythm.

"I should ask you this question, Rachel." Rose wrapped herself in her long sweater, shielding from the afternoon gust, so thankful for the moment alone with her daughter. It had been years since they had strolled through the sandy beach like that, enjoying each other company.

The last time was just before they had moved to Arcadia Bay. A million years ago.

Rachel remembered the last walk pretty well. An angry, disappointed and complaining brat, who was so displeased about the sudden change, hating the circumstances with every fiber of her being, started a tantrum even if her mother promised it would be fine. It was more than fine after all, despite the hell her father raised.

Father. James. She sighed.

"How is he treating you?"

"The times were rough, but your father is busy with his new clients and is rarely home." A diplomatic answer, as always. Rose didn't want to dwell on details. "That helped us to sort things out."

The cranes started to move faster, urging them to speed up the pace, but mother and daughter resisted the temptation.

"I see. I'm glad." Rachel took a deep breath. "Don't tell me I have to forgive him, please." She blurted out suddenly.

Her mother surrounded her arm with her hand, squeezing lightly, and kept wandering through the white sand, now glittering in the colorful lights of the harbor and ships on the horizon. The young woman who was walking by her side had changed a lot, had gone through so much, but needed support more than ever. It felt so good finally being able to give her some strength, even if not that significant overall.

"He's your father. He's trying. I know the situation was pretty tense…"

Peace. The only thing that her mother wanted more than everything was peace. Rachel shared her wish but couldn't pretend that everything was just simply fine. Some wounds could change into scars, but it didn't mean the marks would disappear completely with time.
An echo of the distant harbor's alerts was clashing with the serene commotion of the peaceful tide.

"After everything he's done to me, after everything we went through, he left me, mom. He kicked me out on the street. I know I was an asshole and stoned to death but he just fucking gave up on me."

Her voice was soft and gentle, even if the recalls were still hurtful. "He just said 'get out' and that was it."

"He would never leave you like that, it was just a moment of strong elation." Rose had been always protecting her husband, even if they both knew how much she had suffered through the last couple of years. It wasn't an act, it was part of her nature. "Patience was never his strong suit, you know how fast his aversion escalated. You knew you could come back home any time, if only..."

"If only I did whatever he wanted me to do, I know." Rachel cut her off gently, without anger but a bit of impatience. She didn't want to fight with her mom, not with her, but some things had to be said. "Chloe... If Chloe hadn't forgiven me, if she hadn't taken care of me... I would be fucking dead, mom. I would be rotting in a ditch. She was with me all the time, through the worst and the best, in sickness and hell. And he still..." She got silent, sinking in the dunes of sand.

It was so hard to walk through this damn beach.

"He invited her, didn't he?" Her mother smiled lightly. "It will take time, but he will learn how to respect your... friend."

The silence was awkward and piercing with the ocean's tide. Rachel almost snapped, tired of explaining everything over and over again. She knew that it was just a poor choice of words on her mother's part, but it didn't stop her from making another statement.

"She's not my friend, mom. She's my girlfriend."

Rose blushed a little. Children always expected parents to know the right way and expect an accurate reaction, taking it as a given, but it was never easy.

The tall cranes started to dance again, passing each other's hands smoothly but never bumping or stumbling with each other. Pure, industrial magic. The metal ropes looked like a steel net, prepared to catch the fragile load if an accident would happen.

"But she is your friend too, right?" She squeezed Rachel's arm again, pulling her closer. "Like best friend."

"You know what I mean." Rachel added quietly.

They were walking in silence, arm by arm, not rushing, not urging each other to continue. Rachel realized she almost forgot the smell of her mom's perfumes, how soft her favorite sweater was, how she was carefully stepping in the sand not to wet her white shoes.

"So, you two..." Rose began gently, not sure if her daughter would like to talk about her lover. She would love to hear more, but Rachel could retort so uncompromisingly sometimes. "Are you planning to keep it going for longer than high school?"

"Way longer. I don't really plan to end it at all. Neither does Chloe."

Rose nodded, not really surprised. She didn't have to ask to know how much her daughter was in love with her blue-haired friend. Every mother knew at some point and even if her blond adopted little angel was used to hiding a lot of her feelings inside, it was simply too obvious. She had known from the start, she had felt it seeing a unique, passionate spark in Rachel's eyes when those two
started to hang out together and even if it had been concerning at the beginning, Rose had never shared her reservations, always hoping for the best. They had never spoken about it, never touched the subject, never discussed it, especially after the whole mess that James had caused three years ago. Rachel's mother was never against it, always open-minded and more than liberal, but no one really asked for her advice or acceptance. It was always a fight between the father and daughter.

It didn't change much since then.

"I remember you two when you met her. Two rebels, missing out school, always causing problems. She was very… dedicated from the start. She's done a lot for you… but are you sure she's the best partner for life?" It was just a soft question, not harsh, not loaded with heavy concern. A question that no one really asked Rachel before.

Partner. For life. It sounded so... good. So unreal.

"Yes, I am, mom." Fortunately, the answer was simple. "I am."

Her mom smiled back. She sacrificed so much for her, shielding and protecting so many times from James' wrath and demands. Rachel felt guilty that she didn't appreciate it before, starting so many selfish fights just to have the last word, get her way. Now it felt so stupid and unnecessary, especially with Rose always so understanding, so supporting. Would she be supporting in that matter too?

The sudden yell of a dock's siren almost gave her a heart attack.

"Your father is very content that you went back to school and proud of the pre-law program." Rose changed the subject briefly, not sure of what else to say about Chloe. It was a sensitive topic, she didn't want to cross the line, grateful of having her daughter back along with her trust. "That's an excellent idea, especially with all the contacts and opportunities he can ensure and provide. He started to ask around for…"

The color lights blinked sharply, an additional set of beams, vibrant fake stars. The harbor was creating its own heaven, its own milky way.

"Oh, he started to plan my life again, didn't he?" Rachel shook her head. "Well, I hope he's not gonna play matchmaker at least."

Her mother didn't let her get away from the embrace.

"You know him." Rose didn't try to deny her suspicions. It would be ridiculous, they both knew what James was up to. "He always likes to talk about his daughter and the possibilities..."

Rachel was so done with the fake stars.

"There are no possibilities, mom. I'm gay." It was supposed to be a firm and brave statement, but her voice cracked, broke down, almost leaving it as a question, a request for approval.

The sand in her shoes was getting painfully scratchy, but Rachel didn't want to stop walking. She almost stumbled, but her mother supported her, holding in place. This woman didn't give birth to her, she wasn't sharing the same DNA, but it was her mom and she would always be.

Her ears were still ringing with the leftovers of the loud siren.

"Rachel. I know." Rose's voice was gentle, soft, like a lullaby, a calm song for an uneasy kid. A peaceful melody. "I knew from the very beginning, sweetheart. I know your father might not fully understand it yet, but he will get there. He will."
They looked at each other, seeing their connection in a different light. The strings got re-attached strongly, differently, on point this time. The harbor's stars didn't look so forged anymore, blending in with the reddish sky. The honks started their work song again, but it was way quieter, more respectful.

It was getting late after all.

"One way or another, huh?" Rachel forced herself to smile, suddenly so shy and introverted. Getting back this support meant more than she previously thought, feeling so alone in the struggle against her father's wishes and dreams.

Rose just nodded and smiled gently.

"One way or another." She confirmed.

***

"Chloe, please come in. Would you like something to drink?"

His daughter's friend took a step forward, not sure if she was allowed to sit down or if standing up was part of the custom. Or the punishment. Good. Keeping people doubtful and anxious was James Amber's favorite sport.

The office was crowded with stillness. Chloe had no idea that somebody would actually pay a lot of money to create a room filled with silence on purpose. Sacrificing thousands of dollars to create their own inner jail, where the head of the household locked himself down for hours every day was an odd choice, but whatever floated their boat. That was where Rachel stole the handcuffs from. Chloe was surprised she didn't get a long, heavy chain instead. Something was telling her those kinds of things could be found easily around here.

"Sherry?" She tried to joke, but seeing his scolding gaze, she cleared her throat with an unsure wink. It was better not to try to make him laugh though. "Alright, I will stick to water, no problem."

James Amber's office looked way more impressive than the previous one. More books, more shelves and metal cabinets packed with folders and files created the atmosphere of cold professionalism and authority. Probably that's why he summoned her to his main cave, not treating her with a chit-chat at the library. She wasn't his daughter after all, it had to be more official. When the seat was offered to her, Chloe took it gratefully, even if her instinct was to run the fuck away.

"I heard you are a very good student." James started with a smile, warm and welcoming. "Your teachers are very fond of your skills and quite impressed by your achievements."

"I try." Chloe sniffed, thinking intensely of what else she could say. Dwelling about her academic successes seemed out of place. He wouldn't give a fuck. She wasn't family after all, just an investment, a bargain. "Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Amber."

"I'll do everything for my daughter."

"Me too." Her words traveled faster than her thoughts.

His fingers played a fast staccato on the wooden desk's surface. Chloe had this feeling like she had
just taken a wild shortcut avoiding the swamps of false compliments and phony declarations. It was a road he didn't expect her to choose and wasn't really pleased with the direction. It could be a deadly highway without a warm up, but maybe it was for the best.

Why delay such a ride, right?

James Amber was watching her for a painfully long while. The walls in his office moved and got closer, trapped her more in her own insecurities. The blue rebel didn't really have a choice. She had to face this guy, survive this annoying investigation, moving walls or not.

"Don't get me wrong, Chloe. I like you." No, he didn't. "I'm very grateful you took care of Rachel, when she was indisposed and, well… Unfit. I'm very glad that those times are behind her and she was able to overcome her issues getting back to society." James leaned over his desk, watching her carefully. "What are your plans, Chloe? What are you both planning to do? You will both graduate next year. It's time to think about the future."

"Rachel wants to go to law school, as you probably know. Me..." She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe college, maybe work, maybe whatever."

"This 'whatever' concerns me." A teacher's look wasn't something Chloe expected to see in sunny California, far away from Blackwell's obligations. "Especially if you're planning to still be involved with my daughter."

She shifted on the comfy chair, feeling the familiar drought in her mouth. Questioning their relationship wasn't something that Chloe reacted with patience though. His planned choreography of the gentle ballet between nice and respectful but offensive and despicable was always impressive and she forgot the rules on how to avoid the confrontational dancefloor.

The danger got ignored.

"I'm still planning to be involved as much as possible. Even more than now." She blurted out almost scaring herself with the random surge of audacity. Damn, did she just tell him what she was trying to articulate to Rachel the whole time? Stupid pirate bravery, you motherfucker. Why now?

Perhaps it was Chloe's blunt smirk, maybe the sheepishness she desperately tried to cover with annoying confidence, maybe it was the fact that she had fucked his daughter in the swimming pool last night, not bothered by the presence of her hosts, who welcomed her in this house with respect and admiration. Or maybe it was Rachel's challenging gaze when James Amber entered her bedroom yesterday morning. One way or another the line had been crossed. The meaning between Chloe's words was more than clear, obvious enough to cool down his gaze and make his tone less kind.

"Don't do anything stupid, Chloe." He spoke with a warm, nice, sympathetic and severe warning. "Nothing you would regret."

Regret? Chloe leaned forward, neglecting being polite. This guy had kicked out his own daughter on the street, had done horrible things to his family and people around them, and whatever high ground he thought he was speaking from was lost and burnt down by his own wrongdoings. The expensive, luxurious high horse was full of shit.

Fucking hypocrite.

"I won't regret anything, Mr. Amber." She responded boldly. "Why are you so against us?"

"I'm not against you, Chloe, or against your relationship with my daughter that I'm perfectly aware of, from the very start." That almost made her blush. No, not almost, her cheeks went damn red. "I
supported you both and didn't interfere with this involvement, letting you do whatever pleases you both, for years."

Her left leg started to nervously dance in an impatient way.

"Why can't you just be fine with the fact that your daughter is happy?" She bit her lip trying to force herself to think only about the hopes, not her fears. It was sometimes so easy to break her beliefs that Rachel was indeed happy. Her girl was so joyful this morning, so delighted in her arms just a few moments ago. She was making Rachel happy, full stop.

"Because I don't believe she is."

Chloe took a deep breath.

"Why?" So close to breaking down, she managed to keep her voice peaceful. It was a fucking miracle. "Because I'm a broken girl from a broken home? A social delinquent?"

James Amber leaned back in his comfortable, leather chair and looked at her with a reprimand. This girl really wanted to fight, but the blue flame of her fire was so easy to stifle. Her last question got locked between the cozy walls of his office, sounding more like a pleasant inquiry than a desperate effort.

"Quoting the words that I've said in anger and apologized for won't help our future relations, Chloe. To be frank, I think my daughter will outgrow this relationship one day and move forward, so will you. You both are too different and strive for opposite things in life. Her ambitions and dreams might be destructive for somebody…"

Her head was so low that James got concerned she would start crying. So direct and honest, this girl should be able to take some truth, pleasant or not. It was his responsibility and her obligation to take it without a complaint.

"Somebody, who just loves your daughter?" First time. That was the first time she confessed it, admitted it in person. She didn't even notice. He didn't care.

"Who just wants to do 'whatever.'" James' eyebrow rose, making the whole blunt and desperate statement completely irrelevant.

Her long blue hair frisked about when she looked around the office to avoid this cold calculation, the despicable attention. It was a slap in her face, a kick to her stomach, leaving her sore with every single passing second, silent or not.

It was humiliating.

It took her years to realize that the Rachel Amber was indeed her Rachel Amber, and the blond dedication was working very hard to make Chloe forget the burden behind the popular name, discovering the real girl behind. She patiently had been building her pyramid of self-confidence, based on a very unstable and shaky foundation, and he just invited her here, offered a cold beverage and started hammering it, hitting and striking, creating crack after crack.

"So, I'm just fine if I won't stick around." The walls around were closing in slowly, Chloe shifted nervously, knowing what was coming. "Just a little gay friend for her adolescent times, right?"

James closed his eyes for a second, agreeing with her. He didn't even pretend it was a sad conclusion, just a simple well-known fact. Chloe bit her lip again wishing she had never agreed to come to this place, this house and this state. Her lips were already marked with red bruises of forcing
herself to be silent.

"I couldn't say it better." James' voice was offish and cold, like they were chatting about a new business venture, discussing the situation of the New York stock exchange, instead of his daughter's future. "Rachel's sexual orientation is her own choice..."

"It's not a choice." She cut him off, building some resistance. Beating her up mentally was one thing, but no one could talk bullshit about Rachel, even her own father.

"It's her own business." This small, blue fire deserved a smirk, even if it would burn down quickly. "And I fully accept it, but still..."

"I'm the problem." Another cut.

He watched her for a long moment. Chloe didn't even blink nor change position, ready to fight for the rest of the night for a scrap of hope. The content of her pocket was burning her skin, and her left leg was still moving in a nervous pace.

She just realized she hadn't even touched the glass of water.

"I know why my daughter is so fond of you." James spoke slowly. "Because you are always so blatantly honest."

They both released the air at the same time. So, it was done. That was his stance. All the hospitality, nice dinners, yacht trips and polite words were just a game. Nothing had changed through the last three years. Nothing would ever change.

Chloe didn't even know what she had expected.

"Better that than being an excellent liar." She blurted out but hissed at her own impatience. This pointless fight had to be stopped, it was leading all of them nowhere. For Rachel, for them together, she had to be civil for once. It was so damn hard to do the right thing now, to play the honesty card in a different way. "Mr. Amber, I know I was an asshole for years. I know you think I'm the one to blame for all the shit Rachel went through, but I assure you I only want her to be happy and healthy and support her with everything she wants." She was gesturing sharply trying to add as much power as she could to those words. She cared. She loved. It couldn't be that bad.

James Amber just nodded gently and stood up, finishing this short and effective meeting. He probably could've played it differently, but the result was satisfying after all. He got what he wanted.

"Good. Same with me. Just please, think before you will make any decision, Chloe." His last words were obviously a threat. A clear, severe warning.

And with all her strength and candor, Chloe Price couldn't force herself to disregard it and left the new, silent office with her head up, but feeling as down as never before.

***

Rachel found her at the shore, just by the lifeguard post, sitting alone and smoking in the light of the golden hour, when the shadows were getting longer, greedier and possessive, taking over the white sands. The beautiful Californian sunset could change its taste from sweet and adorable to bitter and
doleful and Chloe was apparently chewing on the dark corners, not the feast of natural lightshow.

"How was your talk?" She asked sitting by her side, happy to see her again, even if she wouldn't mind spending more time with Rose. Something about the way Chloe twitched feeling her closer was concerning. A small move but spoke louder than words.

"Divine." It was more than gloomy. Rachel frowned. "How was your walk?"

"Alright. Did he…” Something was wrong. More than wrong. Something had happened, when Rachel let herself just to be careless for a moment, dropped her guard off, left them alone. Irritated a bit, she looked at her girlfriend and the sight of the terrible, emotional burden hidden between short blinks of the blue eyes took her breath away.

Oh God.

"I don't want to talk about it." Chloe shook her head, trying to hide in her own arms. Avoiding a hand on her arm, she shifted lightly, too sensitive for any physical contact. It could break her down. She didn't want to be broken. "No. I don't, and I won't talk about it."

It was bad. Rachel hadn't seen her that upset for weeks, maybe even months.

"I should've fucking known. I should've known that if I left you for a moment with this asshole, he would say something stupid and upset you. Let me guess…" She wrapped herself in her arms, trying to tame her fury. "We won't survive, and I will leave you for better, greener pastures, huh?" The hazel fire met the blue sadness for a second. It was worse than she expected. Rachel took a deep breath. "You wish. You're not gonna get rid of me that easily, despite the bullshit my father told you. It's me who loves you, not him."

"Well, I will have to get used to it..." Chloe looked at the horizon, playing with the cigarette, circling its filter in her fingers.

"Oh, no, you won't."

"I will have to get used to this bullshit as much as he will have to get used to me." The smile was sad and weak. Accepting. Rachel hated this kind of acceptance. "I will pay the price, no problem."

"A price for amber, huh?" Her own angel tried to joke but was too irate to keep it upbeat. Her hands embraced Chloe's waist when their foreheads met. Rachel closed her eyes feeling so helpless and guilty. "I'm so fucking tired of you getting shit because of me. I wish I could protect you from every fucking mean thing, every single stupid talk… What the fuck is in your pocket…? Anyway, one more time, one more stretch and I will tell him I don't want to see his face ever again. I've never..."

So heat up by her own words, she almost missed the strong shiver of the blue arms. "Baby? Are you crying?"

"No." Chloe wept, pushing her away lightly, wiping tears with the back of her palm. Her chest was rapidly lifting in the short, hasty sobs, she really tried to stop and suppress, but failed miserably. Failed again. She was never great with holding anything inside though. It took her a good minute to stop fighting, to give up as she cried helplessly, surrounded by the loving arms, too embarrassed to look at Rachel, still shocked and baffled.

"I'm here." She heard her voice, when held tightly. "I will always be here."

Chloe sobbed harder. "No, you won't." She expectorated finally, not even trying to be diplomatic or gentle. The walls had closed, crushed her hopes, leaving her thin and heartbroken with the worst of her fears. Humiliated, violated, treated like an outcast, like garbage, she just wanted to hide, to just
fucking vanish for a minute, hour, entire month. Her big plan seemed so stupid, so meaningless now.

Pointless.

"Stop with this bullshit." Rachel stated firmly, getting more and more scared. "I'm not going anywhere."

That would be a great time to start laughing and crack a joke. Or get a kiss. Or smoke again. Or do whatever, but Chloe just couldn't stop. The tears were still appearing under her eyelids, like a silent, salty invasion, an unstoppable wave of a fucking force. Her girlfriend's father pierced the wall of her stubborn resistance and nothing could patch it up now. The trip, the constant effort of asking the big question, the cold distress and all the hopes were enough to melt her down. The talk at the end was just the last bullet, the last nail, last fucking slap. A girl from a small town had gone through the big world tornado and now was curling inside, just like a child, a small kid scared of the darkness outside.

"You will get tired of me one day." She gestured weakly, sniffling and weeping. "You will find somebody special, somebody who is like you and you will fucking leave me."

The shadows were getting longer, eating her up. Golden hour her ass.

"Like me?" Rachel laughed shortly but she wasn't in a cheerful mood, on the contrary. "If I wanted somebody like me I could masturbate to death instead." Then her voice got soft, so tender and so loving. She was rocking her slowly, stealing every tear, every sniffle. "Baby… You are my special one. I don't want anybody else…"

Chloe cried harder.

Fucking can of fancy worms. James Amber opened her up, vivisection her, aiming precisely in the weakest points. Chloe should be grateful she didn't break down in his office, in front of his nonchalant gaze, giving him even more satisfaction, more proof that he had been right from the get-go. The blue mess didn't even remember when was the last time she expressed those stupid fears, all those doubts, everything she was afraid of. It was so stupid. So unnecessary and so needed at the same time.

"I just can't. Be. Without. You. Like. At. All." Every word was a break between the sobs.

Painful sobs.

"Same here, baby. Same here." Rachel whispered, holding her biggest treasure, so damn destroyed and shattered to pieces by a person she almost trusted again. By her own damn father. And if somebody was about to pay the price for it, it wouldn't be Chloe.

Chloe Price had paid enough.

***

Mark Jefferson didn't even look at him when he got back, opening the trunk and dropping the shovel inside. The tool ringed weakly, but the noise got cut off with the thump of the closed hood.

Nathan curled inside, scared to death. Mark didn't let him to clean up, not even trusting him enough
to do it. It wasn't his fault, he wasn't the one to blame. Kelly Davis could stop him somehow, right? Mark could stop him, he was still learning, he needed guidance, he needed help.

He was in need. In need. In need.

Jefferson got to the car, slamming the door and buckling up the seat belt. The inside burst with his expensive cologne, a mix of sweat and displeasure. The silent click woke Nathan up, made him even more nervous. Young Prescott took a deep breath, almost whizzing, trying to focus again, straighten his crumbled thoughts into one single highway of goals and priorities. Mark looked at him with disgust. This stupid boy, this annoying little rich cockroach put their whole operation in danger, changed the direction, made a complication. Jefferson hated complications, he preferred his life clinically clean and in order. He was the order.

"It's done." He urged Nathan impatiently. "Drive."

He politely started the engine and drove off. The tires whirled in the mud with a disgusting, sickening sound and the red SUV turned slowly, leaving the wasted experiment along with the other wrecks at the junkyard of American Rust.

***

"What did you tell her?!!"

"Rachel, sweetheart…" James Amber got up from his chair, surprised with the sudden storm bursting into his office. His hand kept his files in place, like he was afraid that the papers would fly away with the sudden gust of livid wind.

"Don't sweetheart me!" His daughter pointed at him, pale from rage. She was literally shaking "What the fuck did you tell my girlfriend?"

James Amber sighed softly. He believed Chloe would keep the conversation to herself, but apparently, he couldn't trust her even in that simple matter. This girl should really learn some simple rules and stick to them, keeping her mouth shut. Her honesty was more than concerning.

"We had a serious talk with Chloe about your common future." He explained politely. "I hope we've found a mutual ground and shared understanding."

It was a very important crystal vase he had gotten from the governor's wife during a very essential ceremony two years ago. Rose cut fresh flowers from the garden every other Sunday to decorate his office, always creating colorful bouquets and placing them in it. The vessel, now fortunately empty, almost got shattered to pieces hitting the wooden floor.

"You lying piece of shit motherfucker!" Rachel hissed, driven to the edge even more by the chaos she just created. "All those fucking years you forced me to do things that I hated. All this shady business and shit you planned to do to Sera. All those years you were crossing the fucking line feeding me with this bullshit and training me like a fucking animal, I forgave you and am still trying to forget. I'm asking you just for one fucking thing in return. Respect Chloe!"

Chloe lifted her head alerted and surprised. She was slowly walking back to the house, passing the terrace and heading to the pool area, and hearing her name stunned her. It wasn't as concerning as the huge fight that was happening right now behind the closed door of James Amber's office.
"Rachel?" She whispered to herself, utterly baffled.

Rose sent her an apologetic look through the huge window, disappearing into the kitchen. Chloe hesitated, not sure if she should enter the mansion, so she decided to just smoke one by the pool instead.

She was able to hear more, listen in.

James Amber shook his head looking at the pile of papers on his desk. He really needed to work today before the drive to the airport. His heart quivered a little, recalling him of his blood pressure he should be careful about. An argument, profound or not, was unnecessary and very distracting. His daughter could swear his hands were trembling a little bit.

"You can't force respect, Rachel. It has to be earned."

"She earned it the hard way." His daughter snarled, taking away the hair from her face, annoyed by the distraction. "She was with me when I needed it the most! Her! Not you!" She pointed at him, losing her barely gained patience, then weakened again, shaking inside. She really could use a fix now. "I hit rock bottom, dad. You didn't do anything, and she... Chloe... Chloe did everything. It's more than enough to earn your precious respect."

He stood up tall, a mountain of authority presenting himself in his glory and power, trying to force the high ground of parenting he had lost a long time ago. She felt like a little kid again, being scolded, getting punished, rebuked. It was scary, frightening, terrifying, but Rachel wasn't his little daughter anymore.

"I'm aware, but you're missing the point."

"Oh, yeah?" She challenged him with her gaze, crossing her hands on her chest.

James Amber clenched his jaw, seeing the same fire in her eyes he had seen in Chloe's. The same passion for the same lost cause. It was time to put all the cards on the table, use the final leverage. She had crossed the line. She should have known better.

"You have been connected to shady individuals, involved with the drug smuggling business and had an affair with a criminal that previously had supplied Sera with heroin! You have no idea how many hardships I had to overcome to clean up your record! You're telling me you love her and you plan your life with her, but I heard that before. And where has it taken you?" His stubborn daughter looked at the ceiling, shaking her head but still letting him speak. Good. "It brought you to your knees, Rachel. Because of her you were addicted to illegal substances, because of her you dropped out of school, because of her you started to sleep around with a guy who had been destroying your biological mother's life! Because of her and all the turmoil she had put your through!"

Chloe bent over, her smoke was burning her hand. It was hard to focus, the pool waves were dancing in front of her eyes, making her dizzy. Frank. He knew. Everybody fucking knew.

She heard Rachel throwing something. Judging by the sound it was the glass of water she had never touched during her own argument with James Amber. An argument which wasn't even half as fierce as this one.

"It's so not true!" The glass disappeared in transparent slices in the blink of an eye. Rachel had no intention to blink anytime soon. "You want to blame somebody? Fine. Blame yourself!" She yelled finally releasing everything she was storing inside for so long.
"Myself?" James' eyebrow rose. He was truly surprised, it wasn't an act this time. "I've always given you everything you wanted. I've always protected you."

Chloe looked at Rose, who bowed her head still cleaning the dishes. Their gazes meet for a second, but they parted quickly, both embarrassed and speechless. It wasn't their fight even if they both would have to deal with the consequences.

"Oh, I know your protection." Rachel snapped with a derisive smirk. "Hiring a fucking hitman to solve your problems?"

James' heart sped up. He could hear it thumping.

"It was only for your own good and we won't talk about it!" His voice increased for the first time this evening, when he desperately tried to cut the discussion before it started. It worked. His daughter didn't give a shit about the history. She was focused on the present and the future only.

"Fine." Rachel pointed at him again, getting close to his face and hissing in anger. "You gave up on me, just like you gave up on Sera, hoping somebody else would do the dirty job or I would just end up dead. And Chloe did it." She wanted to hit him, but the wooden desk got a slap instead. "I went through shit because of a lot of things, but she was never the reason I got into drugs! And better get used to Chloe Price, for real, because one fucking day I'm gonna take her name and you won't stop me!"

Chloe's chest tightened. James Amber's heart sank. His pulse was ripping his veins apart. Damn blood pressure. He really wanted to sit but it would be a sign of defeat, a stain of weakness.

"Stop joking, Rachel." He said only.

"I'm not joking." She got him, she knew she got him. That was what he was afraid of. "I've never been more serious in my life. You want this family time to keep happening? You want nice dinners and chilling on the beach? Deal with it! Deal with the fact that I'm with her and that won't change!"

Another perfect stroke, another hit. He moved his head to the side like it was a real slap. Trying to be rational, James looked into the burning hazel eyes, finding a flaw he could use. There was none. He remembered when she was just a little girl, always trustful and playful, always looking for his protection, always grateful for it. The young woman he was facing now, wasn't asking for anything, but protecting somebody else. Somebody who he would never suspect her to shield that fiercely.

"Remember about your future." His voice was hollow, like an echo of his own power. He touched his chest, checking if the damn heart was still in place or jumped outside instead. His left hand was slowly getting numb. Bad sign.

"She is my future!" Rachel's fist slammed the desk with full force. "Don't you get it? The only future I want!" She yelled.

Chloe, looking at the emerald water of the swimming pool, had to smile. She wasn't in the office, she wasn't even inside the house, but her hands were sweating, her throat was dry and irritated from the fast pace of smoke. Rachel, Rach, Sunshine. She wanted to be by her side so badly, but it wasn't her war even if she was the award, the fucking price. Leaning over the wall, Chloe felt her legs shaking. She was so proud of her, so grateful, but staying aside felt so helpless and feeble. The bold rebel could only listen, even if she was the most important part of the argument.

James rose his hands in a defensive gesture. It somehow calmed them both down.

"Alright. Rachel. I understand where you're coming from. She loves you very much. And you love
"My partner?" She hated that word, but it meant way more than just 'her company.' "Why can't you just say her name? What's so fucking hard?"

Another dose of the cold, office's silence. Blue price bit her lip. Rachel was breathing fast, damn stubborn, obstinate and determined. She was nowhere close to giving up.


It got Rachel even more fuming and heat up somehow. The slow words spilled tons of fuel to her already crazy burning fire.

"My girlfriend, Chloe. My partner, Chloe. Two fucking things in one sentence. Is that too much to ask!?" What kind of proof did he need to finally understand? What argument did she have to present to make him believe it wasn't just a phase, chapter zero of her adult life? She was so close to yell that this girl… No, this woman, was sleeping in the same bed, eating from the same table, waking up in her arms every day and fucking her each night. With reciprocity.

And it wouldn't fucking change.
Her father's eyelids were trembling when he looked at her, ready to finally give up and accept his defeat. Dishonored by his own daughter in his own, new and expensive office, he gathered the oddments of his dignity finding the right tone.

"Your girlfriend and your loving partner, Chloe, is always welcome here. Always."

Father and daughter watched each other for a long while. She could push more, she had him in her grasp, she could break him so easily now, just like he did with Chloe. James Amber was desperate to get his family back, to keep it and preserve it. He had some dirt on her, he had always had some, but she owed the biggest leverage of them all.

It was enough. She got what she wanted.

"Thank you. Thank you, father." She nodded and walked out the door leaving shattered glass and broken pieces on the warm, fuzzy carpet, not finding enough cruelty to push it further.

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"Fucking asshole." She hissed, bursting outside and running her pockets trying to find a smoke. Damn, she really needed to keep her hands busy otherwise she would break something else, something more significant, like her mother's heart, like the fragile peace between them, like her own family. Again.

"Hey, little warrior. Another battle on the parents' territory?" She heard Chloe's voice behind and somebody put a hand on her shoulder. She turned around immediately taking a cigarette already lit up and prepared for her.

Rachel smoked out, still in battle mode.

"You spend too much time with Steph." She stated sharply, then lifted her head and looked directly into Chloe's eyes. Her voice got softened magically. "I'm gonna always protect you, dork. I won't let anybody to stand in our way."

Her blue pirate was captivated and swept off her feet. Shy again, but this time because of a completely different reason, still with swollen eyes and not really sure how to react to the tender touch on her face, she finally whispered: "You really… fought for us."

"For us and for you." Rachel's eyes weren't hazel anymore. They were pure melted gold. "What did you think? That I was fucking joking?"

Chloe just hugged her tightly, silencing all talk and not even letting her to take a breath. She had never expected that much, never even dared to ask for it. One argument and a few broken glasses were more than enough to finally put her back together, build her up stronger, disregard all the anxiety. If this wasn't true, she had no idea what honesty meant. Rachel really needed this hug, a confirmation that this fight was needed, and she was accepted, supported and loved. Her doubts were erased a long time ago, but it had always been hard to prove it. And fuck yeah, she did. She snuggled closer, with her hands desperately grabbing the blue arms. Rose was watching them for a second and then walked away heading to the first floor.

They needed to be alone.
"So, your father knew about Frank?" Chloe murmured and kissed her hair, still not letting her take a single step back. "Sorry, you were hella loud out there."

Mentioning this asshole was always making Rachel furious, but this time she just felt tired. She just started a war, went through a hella battle, but discussing the infamous drug dealer who almost destroyed her relationship was a brawl she didn't want to take.

"Yeah, he probably had some fucking DA snitch there, he always knew shit. I'm sorry you heard this and that he had to remind you about it…" She winced, so exhausted and worn out. "I wouldn't be surprised if he has our first time on tape stashed somewhere in his office." It was supposed to be a joke and it partly was. Hopefully.

Who the hell knew what James Amber knew anyway? What kind of filthy secrets he kept to himself, watching his whole family, controlling every move. Rachel just realized that the swimming pool was armed with at least two security cameras pointed exactly at the water. Great. So did he have this on tape too? Enjoy watching it, dad. Happy fucking Father's Day.

At least her girlfriend outstood herself that night.

"Now I know how you got this stalking vibe from." Her blue rebel with a bold smile was slowly making a comeback. It was good to see her smile again. Nothing would stop Rachel Amber from rolling her eyes again though.

"Very fucking funny. You're not helping, Price."

Chloe hummed and straightened up in a noble manner then looked at her with sophisticated leer. "I prefer to be referred to as a loving partner." She stated with pure seriousness, that was broken in half by a flirtatious wink.

Rachel wanted to smack her arm, but damn, she just fought to the third broken glass forcing her own father to say it. Her fingers got tangled in the blue hair, when she tilted her head from side to side, grateful they would be home tonight. Real home.

"Do you, really?" She pulled the collar of Chloe's jacket instead. The bullet necklace rang softly. It was their love song. "C'mon, loving partner, do something good for the world and kiss me."

"That would save the world?" Chloe asked before their lips met.

"That would save me."

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The snap of the peaceful bay got taken, the old polaroid camera vomited the wet paper and Max could finally dry it out in her hand before putting it back into her bag. She had taken a lot of similar photos during this weekend, always fascinated by the panoramic view, given by the cliff by the lighthouse.

Steph was almost done packing, finally succeeding with putting the tent back to its folded form. The escapade had ended, it was time to get back home and to the common reality. There were more chores and more things to do before they left but holding her little freckle was more important than organizing the back of the white van.
"Mmmm…” Max hummed with a happy smile, feeling her girlfriend's hands on her waist and her chin resting on her shoulder. "I don't want to go back." She murmured.

"We have to." Steph was sharing the same wish and confirmed it with a short kiss to her neck. "But we can always come back here the next weekend or even explore other camping grounds if you like."

The statement was filled with double meanings that made Max giggle. She turned back and awarded her girl with a proper kiss, caressing her cheek gently. "Maybe." She added. "Although I didn't like sleeping in the tent as much as I expected. And Steph… Thank you so much for being here with me. It helped. Tons."

Her girlfriend nodded, feeling tense and relieved at the same time. Max told her all about her dreams and weird visions of a huge tornado destroying the town. Even if that was just a stupid nightmare, she wanted to be here just to prove herself wrong. Steph didn't mind, even if feeling uneasy every time they were touching the subject. They both hoped it would be the final chapter, the ultimate healing moment.

It worked. Max smiled freely, widely and with pure joy.

"I like this smile." Steph winked. "Where did it come from?"

"Well," Her girlfriend looked at the horizon one more time. "I finally did something right. I finally did it right."
Burnt And Broken

Kelly Davis was officially pronounced missing on October 17th, 2013, exactly a week after she had been seen last. A few days later her father had flown from Chicago confronting the sad reality, concerned by the last voice message his daughter had left him. The Arcadia Bay police searched and locked Kelly’s room with principal Wells’ assistance and started the long and uncomfortable procedure of asking questions and checking the security tapes. The officers talked to the girl’s friends and people who she had interacted with the most, including Chloe Price and Mark Jefferson, but no one could give any hints or insights on where she might have been right now.

It really looked like a typical run-away case though.

Kelly apparently had taken all her personal items with her, along with the travel bag, leaving her space wiped clean, posters taken from the wall and the bed properly folded, preparing the room ready to move in for another student. Her effort was immediately ruined by the police search but since there was no suspicion of criminal activity, no one had bothered to take fingerprints or conduct any other forensic tests. The officer dedicated to the case was bored to death of the investigation before it had even started, mumbling something about spoiled rich brats and proving to everybody that Kelly had left voluntarily, no third party involved. The most important evidence of his prejudged deduction was a simple note left on a plush pillow, saying that she had been tired of boarding school and needed a break, deciding to travel around the US to experience something exciting and expand her horizons. Joseph Davis, following Mark Jefferson’s advice, decided not to share the actual content of the note with the public, protecting his daughter’s privacy, which obviously started a lot of gossips, conjectures and assumptions. While examining the undisclosed letter, the police hadn’t paid that much attention to the handwriting, assuming it had to be Kelly’s and didn’t compare it to any of her class notes or scribbles found around the room. Satisfied that the girl’s father had taken this explanation without many questions asked, they shrugged and grabbed a coffee and a donut in the school cafeteria, chatting cheerfully with principal Wells, hoping that the girl would just show up by herself.

The letter, now hidden between the case files, was written in a lighthearted and positive tone, just a wishful thinking of a young kid who wanted to elope, leaving everything behind and not worrying about the fact that she was still a minor. Both Rachel and Chloe shared similar dreams at her age, like most of the inhabitants of Arcadia Bay and some inmates at Blackwell’s educational prison, so it wasn’t even remotely surprising. Kelly’s father couldn’t also provide any insights about his daughter’s plans and actions since he had been barely in contact with her and, even if worried and distressed, he had to get back to Chicago, leaving the search to the locals. No one had heard from Kelly since she had vanished though, and even if everybody was hoping for the best, the anxiety among students and faculty was slowly rising every following day.

“What do you think about this?” Rachel looked at Chloe, when they walked through the dorm’s hallway surrounded by the missing person posters covering every free space on the walls. This act of desperation was more than unnecessary, since the whole school was extremely agitated about Kelly’s disappearance and everybody knew her name and face by heart at this point. Rachel’s girlfriend took the news hard, stressing over the investigation and felt weirdly uncomfortable with the printed signs of the tragedy. There was something oddly familiar with the black and white smiling face appearing over and over again, with the full name, height, weight and description of the lizard tattoo.

“Nothing much.” The blue pirate mumbled, grasping her fingers firmly around Rachel’s palm. “I hope they will find her soon. That’s it.” The few questions that the police had asked her the previous day made her uneasy and anxious, not even by the simple fact that she was investigated but because
She couldn’t help much. No one expected her to offer any kind of assistance though and that was making her feel even more useless. Chloe hated being useless.

At first, no one, including her, could believe in the girl’s disappearance, pretty sure that it was just another stupid prank and that she would show up eventually, bragging about her amazing adventures even if they weren’t so wonderful. The more time had passed and the chance of finding Kelly anytime soon was getting feeble, the blue star of Blackwell High was blaming herself more. Rachel, knowing her girlfriend very well, tried to take her mind off of the case, using all her charm, sweet tricks and her own personal magic. It worked. A little bit. Today’s distraction had an amazing outcome even if it cost them to be late to class and Joyce being more snarky than usual after listening to the frantic morning noise, but the blue dreamy smile lasted as long as they crossed the doorstep of the school’s gate, surrounding themselves by the silent anticipation. They both avoided sleeping at Blackwell’s grounds lately, spending nights in Chloe’s room even if it meant a long and cold drive every morning and waking up way earlier.

Rachel squeezed her hand, sending a reassuring smile, but her girl found her worn and dirty shoes way more interesting than the view around, walking slowly with her head bowed and feeling like the whole school changed into one big library where a simple whisper was a crime and the expectation for any kind of news required dead silence. Even her own steps on the carpet floor seemed too loud and distracting. They both knew the ill atmosphere wouldn’t last long. Rachel, aware of the anatomy of the crowd, was damn sure that Blackwell would get back to be this vulgar and careless zoo pretty soon, good news or not.

Not everybody was touched by the situation as much as Chloe though. Victoria Chase passed them by with a wry smirk, engaged in a phone conversation. It seemed like the fashion snake was obnoxiously ostentatious especially because of the grim ambiance around and decided to show how much she didn’t give a fuck. At least she didn’t try to fake anything this time.

“I’m not talking about Kelly.” Rachel sighed quietly, when her sworn enemy vanished behind the hallway doors, slamming them with a loud bang. She touched Chloe’s arm and with a slight nod of her head she pointed at a familiar figure busy with placing yet another poster on the information board. “I’m talking about her.”

Her blue worry lifted her head, finally noticing Max, who was absolutely absorbed by her work not even responding to any of the morning greetings. She got obsessed with this case immediately, way before the breaking news became common knowledge, trying to help as much as she could. The problem was she was trying way too hard, dedicating every moment of her life to work on Kelly Davis’ disappearance, talking to people, making notes and even contacting the girl’s family. Chloe sighed deeply, recalling her talk with Steph who was more than concerned seeing another change in her girlfriend’s behavior. Max, always so fragile and sensitive, was taking it too personally, even if she didn’t know the young freshman almost at all. Everybody wanted to help, but there was a limit even to the good intentions. Max was in such a great path to recovery before, but with a snap of the fingers her mood and focus switched painfully, and nothing was left from the cheerful and helpful perspective she was slowly gaining after the mental breakdown. Steph was suspecting it was getting worse, and all the horrors, premonitions and weird visions made a huge comeback. Of course, it was great that Max wanted to help, being so dedicated and active, but all her friends would prefer for her just to chill the hell down instead. It wasn’t her fight anyway.

That was partly why Chloe worried so much lately.

She stopped in place, watching her friend compulsively putting another poster, thankful for Rachel’s presence and support. It was hard to see Max slipping down again, sliding into a spiral of unhealthy obsession, exhausting herself and forgetting about all the world around. They were both observing
her in silence for a moment, trying to figure the best way to start the conversation, how to stop her with a reasonable argument or even a convenient lie, just to save her from saving everybody else for one morning at least. Max’s moves seemed automatic, mechanical and almost harebrained. A strip of tape, cut, another one, sharp cut, placing the printed poster, checking if it wasn’t crooked, attaching it, another strip. Done. Next.

“I’m gonna talk to her.” Chloe murmured, surrendering the grip of their fingers and releasing her hand slowly. “Meet me for lunch later?”

“Sure.” Rachel nodded and before she stepped aside running to her class, she stopped her girl for a second, stroking her arm gently. “Chloe... I’m with you, remember. If you need my help with anything… With Max... Please, just tell me, alright? Don’t hide shit.”

The sad, blue eyes sparked.

“Deal. Thanks.” And it was Chloe’s turn to stop her but this time no words were exchanged. It would be a crime to start the day without a proper kiss, even if brief and not passionate. Rachel tried to make it short and sweet, but her girl held her close way longer, striving for more, strangely nervous and edgy. The thought of talking to Max right now made her unusually uncomfortable.

One hazel wink and Chloe found herself alone, with her lips still parted and the nervousness in her every move in front of her childhood friend who didn’t want to listen to anybody but needed her more than ever. She stretched fast and walked to her nonchalantly, faking the blunt confidence, putting an act of a reckless rebel who was never scared of any confrontation.

“Hi there, Maximus Prime!” It was too cheerful, she was speaking too loudly. Chloe cleared her throat. “What’s up?”

“Busy.” Max didn’t even hesitate from grabbing another poster from the pile and placing it on the selected space. Chloe noticed how high the mountain of the printed papers was. Her friend could easily cover the whole town in them and she was apparently prepared to do so. “Helping as much as I can.” Max added and looked at her finally with grit and determination, and then got back to ripping the plastic tape apart.

Chloe scratched her cheek not sure how to react.

“I know. That’s great.” Max’s fight with the tape was getting desperate. Her pirate friend took over and using her teeth provided another stripe. “Posters look well… cool.” She mumbled, spitting the debris of sticky plastic. It was a terrible way to describe the prints and her own words made Chloe awkward again. “You made them yourself?”

“Steph helped me, she’s amazing with Photoshop and stuff. I just suggested... the layout.” Max hung the last one and looked around. There was no space left, her job in this hallway was done. She scrutinized the space carefully, judging her own effort and then looked at Chloe again. “We will hold a vigil on the beach tonight. Are you gonna come?”

Her blue friend frowned, so instead of a verbal explanation Max handed her one of the flyers, she was about to distribute them later today. It looked like a typical brochure for a garage sale, an invite to somebody’s birthday or info about a school dance, just a few printed sentences on a colorful, cheap paper. Nothing special, but could be special for Kelly, for them, for the whole town though. Her and Steph didn’t have time to design anything better, it was such a rush.

“The beach?” Chloe turned the flyer in her hand, surprised. She didn’t hear about the event and felt left out, even if she wouldn’t like to be a big part of it. “Why not at school?”
“Because Wells is being an asshole and he doesn’t want any bad publicity for Blackwell.” Max rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed. Getting irritated was a pretty common occurrence for her. Yet another thing to make her social circle more disturbed. Chloe didn’t have to ask to know her friend had confronted the principal at least a few times demanding help and support. A vigil at the beach would be an outstanding idea if Oregon’s fall wasn’t such a cold and unpredictable bitch, showering the town with severe storms every other day. They would freeze their asses off by the ocean. “He insisted it’s too soon for vigils, since in his mind they are usually organized for dead people.” Max scoffed. “Fuck that. Even the Vortex club decided to help.”

Victoria’s little group and her freckled friend working together on an event dedicated to a girl who was sending Chloe love letters was hard to absorb for the blue haired rebel. Stifling the attempt to crack a snarky comment and fighting with the need to smoke, she looked at the paper flyer one more time, not certain if she should encourage the effort or avoid any kind of remark. The first option seemed more civil though.

They should be there for Kelly anyway.

“Sure, we’ll show up, no problem. Max...” Chloe shook her head, feeling so useless and helpless again. “If you blame yourself for what happened…”

“I don’t blame myself, Chloe.” Max cut her off sharply. “I just want to help.”

She grabbed the rest of the posters and started to walk back to her room. Chloe sighed deeply and ran after her, freeing her from the load. Carrying the posters for Max wouldn’t be a huge help but she wanted to be involved somehow, show her she really cared. Her fingers got immediately stained from the black printed ink. She looked at them again.

Why do the prints look so damn familiar? She couldn’t get rid of a thought that if Rachel and she had run away three years ago, their faces would probably be displayed in a similar manner around the school and the whole town. Would somebody try to find them so desperately like Max? Would anybody put so much energy and sweat into it?

They were strolling through the hallway, passing dozens of faces, always the same, smiling, multiplied, copied and pasted. Same eyes, same smile, same name. The walls were screaming at Chloe, demanding a contribution, requesting an action, but the only thing she could do was to hunch over and hold the rest of the morbid collection, hoping Kelly would come back home soon. Home. Blackwell, somewhere safe.

Kelly. Max. Why did her life always have to be so damn complicated?

“Sure. Yeah. I know...” Damn, Chloe had known this little pirate freckle almost her whole life, they shared the deepest secrets, confident with each other’s trust. Why was it so hard to find the right words now? “Did your dreams come back? Did you have another... vision?” She asked quietly, not sure if she had crossed the line, didn’t push too far.

Max stopped rapidly, and then stretched a little trying to cover her frustration. Her back was killing her after days of placing the posters and sleeping on her desk when she was doing everything in her power to find a single hint about what could’ve happened to Kelly Davis. Chloe’s presence was soothing and appeasing but the lack of understanding was damn irritating. Everybody wanted to help, true, but Max felt as if she was the only one truly involved. The rest of her friends were just following her lead, not really caring that much. She was the only one who cared. The only one. Again.

She was so tired of being alone.
The dreams. Damn you, Chloe, why did you have to go there? She didn’t want to talk about them nor remember them, but every time Max closed her eyes the horrid visions of a red binder with Kelly’s name on it, the black and white photos, the lifeless smile, the dead eyes open, were haunting her days and nights.

Enough. No dreams.

“It doesn’t matter.” Max stated, surprising Chloe once again. “I promised Steph I won’t get involved in this shit again. Listen, if you worry I’m gonna do something stupid, I won’t. I’m not getting crazy, I’m just trying to do the right thing here. Everybody should do something though, otherwise who knows who would be next.”

Chloe moved nervously, still holding the posters and trying to put them together in an even pile. She was never good at walking on eggshells and recently was forced to run freaking marathons through them. Her intuition whispered firmly that there was more to it, she should probe more, get to the bottom of this, but the blue pirate couldn’t find the right words. It was annoying, frustrating and drenching. Max knew her friend was worried and upset but refused to provide any explanations. It was better for Chloe and Rachel to stay away. Just in case.

“They will find her, Super Max.” She heard when she opened the door to her room and the prints were handed back to her. “She will run out of money and come back.”

“I’m sure she will.” Max tried to smile, leaving her in the hallway while closing the door gently. She felt supported but misunderstood again, surrounded by the people who truly loved her, but lonely. It was uneasy to cut her dearest friend out of her life again, but it was kinda relieving at the same time. Two sides of the same blue, sullen pirate coin. How did her life get so complicated again? “Thanks for your help, Chloe.”

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“Rachel? Rachel, please wait. Rachel!”

A loud groan escaped her lips when she stopped in place, ready to light up her smoke, recognizing the high pitch voice in a second. There was only one person in the whole school who would run after her yelling her name in such a nervous and annoying way. First Max and her hallway exhibition, then this. Rachel rolled her eyes but didn’t walk off from him yet. This day was doomed to be grim, intricate and hella unpleasant anyway. Thank god they took their time this morning to make it a little bit better.

“What’s up, Nathan?” Rachel answered politely, but seeing how exhausted he looked, how drained and weary, she frowned a bit. “Are you ok?”

Nathan rubbed his bloodshot eyes, shaking his head again and again, as if he tried to force himself to think, overtake the detachment, pull himself together. Rachel noticed he was quivering a bit, lost some weight and his lips changed into a grey and purple choppy line. Something was troubling this guy, withholding him from getting a decent meal and amount of sleep. Insomnia had been Rachel’s greatest friend for months and she knew how hard it was to function day after day without a moment of rest. Part of her wanted take care of him, investigate his problem and find a solution, but she certainly wasn’t the right person to change young Prescott’s life. She was way too busy with changing her own.
“Yeah, I’m fine, perfectly fine.” Nathan responded fretfully. Was he still on meds or exchanged them for less legal option? Whatever he was taking didn’t seem to work. “Sorry, I know you are busy right now and stuff…”

He noticed the fresh smoke in her hand and grabbed his lighter before she had a chance to reach for her own. His fingers were rolling the flicker for a long moment to the point that he almost got furious but then the spark appeared, and the wick thankfully got licked by the blue and orange flame.

“Yeah, I am.” Rachel didn’t reject the friendly gesture, letting him to light up her cigarette with his golden zippo. His own initials engraved on the side of the lighter flashed between his fingers. So freaking pretentious. What would be next? A coat of arms?

Clang. The lighter got closed. Clang. He almost chewed on his bottom lip, choked, laughed shortly, choked again in a strange, weird way. She inhaled deeply, ready to finish this semi-friendly meeting, move somewhere where smoking was allowed but Nathan Prescott wasn’t. Rachel’s options were awfully limited in that matter. Clang. Damn it. She stayed then. For now.

“I was just thinking…” Nathan was still playing with his lighter, opening and closing it with a repetitive metal sound. “…That maybe you would like to grab a coffee later. You know, with me. Just talk about old times.” Clang. “And new times.” Clang. “And shit.” Clang. Clang. Clang.

Oh, this thing again.

“Are you asking me out?” The metallic jangle was getting annoying, even if Chloe usually played with her lighter in a similar way. When she was doing it, it was cute, and usually meant the blue smoker was either nervous or horny, and Rachel, being an expert of freeing her from those issues, could easily make it stop. Nathan could click the fuck out of his lighter but would never get a similar treatment.

“No... Nah…” It was painful to see him trying to lie. Prescott was always an asshole but terrible at hiding the truth. “I know you are with her... with Chloe, right? So, it’s not like a date.”

At least he finally acknowledged the fact that she was taken. Huge progress was usually made with small steps, right? Rejecting people got so much harder lately and Rachel, previously so thoughtless and bold, was growing more careful in that matter. Hurting people was simple. Being kind was making her life way more problematic than ever before.

“I’m sorry, Nathan.” She just said, dragging another gasp of smoke. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why? Just a friendly conversation, nothing serious, right?” The lighter vanished in his pocket, cleaning the air from the metal knell, while he tried to cover his abashment with a shaky smile. Fake confidence was a popular currency at Blackwell, Chloe was paying with it every day, but she was a way better trader than him.

Rachel breathed in intensely, wondering if she should go with an official explanation or just tell him the truth straight away. The fact that she had promised Juliet to spend some time today on gossips and high school chit-chat was a valid excuse, but her poor drama club friend could be targeted later, if the wounded Prescott ego would demand vengeance for his own misfortune. Fuck it. Rachel had tried to kill his hopes so many times, but he was deaf to all the reasonable arguments, still fighting for leftovers of her attention. With all the signals she had already given him he could land a freaking plane, but no, he was still there, still asking, still begging. It was just one time, one moment of weakness. Rachel really tried to remember if she had ever mentioned the whole thing to Chloe, but their new beginning was so hectic and feverish that she couldn’t recall if the confession about one sloppy kiss a year ago during one of the famous Vortex club parties was made. One drunken kiss
that made Nathan Prescott exceedingly obsessed with her, if he hadn’t been before. Technically it wasn’t something remotely important, nothing worth mentioning. Nathan had gotten enough courage to make a move and she was way too hammered to actually reject his advances, flying so high that the ceiling seemed like heaven’s gate. Chloe probably should know, however that kind of revelation after such a long time tasted more bitter and could create more harm, problems and weird complications.

She was so done with complications.

“Not serious, but I think it would be better for both of us just not to do it.” She finally responded, feeling a little bit guilty. It wasn’t Nathan’s fault he was falling for her. It wasn’t her wrongdoing that he couldn’t let go. Randomly she recalled Chloe’s trembling smirk, when her girl told her about Kelly, a young freshman in love, and Rachel’s own tone of voice softened, changing from firm to remorseful.

“I’m really sorry, Nathan.” She added with a desolated smile. “I know you want us to be... friends, but I don’t really think it’s a good idea. I’m…” She shook her head feeling her earring dancing wildly. “I’m really sorry.”

Young Prescott was standing in front of her, motionless and speechless with his head low and fingers clenching into fists. Rachel wasn’t sure if she just woke up more hopes or started an unstoppable engine of anger and wrath. It was always hard to say what Nathan Prescott would do next, what was he up to. She almost wanted to hug him, touch his arm, just a subtle, reassuring gesture, but it would obfuscate everything even more and she couldn’t afford more parleys like this one.

They couldn’t stand like this forever. Nathan still refused to look at her, so Rachel just killed a half-done smoke and walked off, leaving him in front of the main gate, still paralyzed and mute. He would move on one day, sooner or later. Everybody moved on, even crazy, unstable bastards with gold Zippos.

The early afternoon got surprisingly chilly, freezing her to the bone with slaps of cold windy gusts. It was time to hide inside, engage in the educational drill, keep her mind and hands busy. Rachel looked at the clouds battling above her head, sure that a severe storm would hit them this afternoon. She hoped that the thunders and raindrops would mercifully wait till the end of the vigil. Fire didn’t go very well with rain.

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The sky was grey and dark again, warning with the possibility of a cold shower, but still too lazy and swollen to twitch in the final outbreak. A convenient white fog was just an introduction and a natural prologue of how cold and unfriendly the world would become. The RV, parked by the side of the road, looked almost abandoned and forsaken, covered by the fluffy mist, like one of the shipwrecks by the Pacific seashore, even smaller and dirtier than usual, contrasting with the fresh, bare wilderness around. The ocean of the Oregon National Park was surrounding Bowers’ pride he dared to call home, making the fallen boat almost invisible between the tall pines and hidden between the blooming, moist green.

Nathan stopped just by its side, almost hitting the front bumper and turning his wheels at the last moment to avoid the crash. It wasn’t that easy to park by the RV though, since it took almost the whole space at the muddy roadside, forcing him to maneuver carefully or risk the tires to slip.
Impatient and angry, young Prescott only scoffed, not worried for either vehicle. Leaving any kind of scratch would be a valid evidence, a proof that they were here, and no one could ever know.

“No one can ever know.” Victoria spoke for the first time since they started driving, releasing her seatbelt. “No one ever.” The stupid distress didn’t want to go away and the more she tried to get rid the of silly tension, the stiffer her body became. Tightening her lips in a small, thin line and lifting her chin usually helped to control her emotions, but not this time.

“Don’t worry. It will be our secret.” Nathan winked, surprisingly in a great mood, way too excited and eager to start their adventure. It was strange to see him so relaxed, not stressing over possible consequences, so careless and free. It would be great though if they didn’t plan to break into a drug dealer’s mobile home.

The door got closed remarkably gently when he left the car.

Victoria stayed inside, scratching her nails, chipping on the peels, delaying stepping out and being an active part of this operation. Her life goals and carefully set priorities had never included an extensive search of an old RV, with a barking vicious dog inside. The idea, when presented and described, was interestingly alluring and somehow exciting, but the more they were getting closer to put this plan into action, Victoria was certain it wasn’t a thrill she was looking forward to. That kind of amusement was for simple people, the Blackwell queen always pictured herself as the one who gave orders, not doing a dirty job.

She looked at her watch nervously and it shocked her how early it really was and how much time they really had. It could work, damn it. They could really do it. Everything worked perfectly so far, like the whole universe wanted Victoria Chase to become a dirty criminal, pushing her gently, offering the comfortable circumstances. Very well then.

Checking if her phone was indeed silenced, she slowly got out of the car. Her fingers scrolled though the notifications, messages, emails and files, hoping for an urgent message that would force her to come back. Nothing. However, Rachel’s party video was still there, always ready to re-watch and entertain with Amber being completely fucking drunk, trying to sustain herself standing and then fell to her knees over and over again. Up and down. Up and down. It was quite funny and satisfying but Victoria didn’t share it anywhere yet. Not that she didn’t want to, but everybody was well aware of Rachel’s fallout that night, Chloe included. A secret that the whole school had known of wasn’t a secret anymore, wasn’t a weapon or bombshell ready to explode in Amber’s face. Unfortunately, Rachel hadn’t done anything stupid that night except being wasted. Such a shame. If she had made out with some of the guys or burnt the whole swimming pool down, they wouldn’t have had to come here, trying to find more dirt. It was Rachel’s fault after all. All her fault. It was on her.

Blaming Amber didn’t help much. Victoria was still unsure about the whole thing.

“We’re going too far.” She stated watching Nathan trying to break the door in, first kicking then ramming it with his shoulder. The muffled barking of Frank’s dog was getting louder with every helpless blow. Young Prescott scoffed and tried one more time. It shouldn’t be that hard though, this vehicle was as old as sin and the lock was probably pried open before. He knew from his own experience that Frank kept forgetting his keys or even losing them constantly, so he had to break into his own mobile home many times before. The door kept guarding the trailer’s secret as good as new though.

It should be easy, but it wasn’t.

“There is no such thing as…” Hit. “…Too far” Yet another. “… For people like me.” Nathan’s forehead was sweaty, cheeks flustered with a detestable red blush. Victoria had rarely seen him so
desperate. Her eyebrow rose in silent question. “Or you.” He murmured in response. “We just take... whatever we want.”

It was hard to argue with this simple truth.

Victoria was watching his rough fight with the door closely, wondering what had gotten into him, what motivated him to act so direct. It was his idea to come here today, his plan he described in a nervous rush today morning, storming into her room and obsessively demanding her attention, clicking with his Zippo the whole fucking time. She agreed of course, content that Nathan started to listen and finally understood how some juicy info from this Bowers creature would improve their chances for a decent revenge. Now it didn’t seem so simple or safe as it seemed to be.

The dog kept barking and Nathan’s strength was slowly failing him. Victoria shrugged, ready to go back to the car. Oh well, another day, another disappointment, they would find another way, maybe a little bit safer.

“C’mon Nathan, let’s bail.” She sighed and then gasped loudly, seeing a gun in his hand.

A gun. A real, loaded gun.

Nathan grinned joyfully watching her eyes growing bigger. Surprising people was one of his greatest pleasures in life, scaring them was the second.

“Nathan…” Victoria gasped again. “Don’t even…”

It wasn’t surprising that he owned a weapon, since he loved to be involved with the wrong people and invest in shady businesses, but the situation just quickly escalated from unsafe to extremely hazardous.

“Don’t even what? I’m done with this shit.” The pistol was pointed at the lock slowly in a long theatrical move, when Nathan was trying to aim, closing one eye for a better result. Victoria doubted he had ever tried to do it before, except some video game experience. Digital cameras didn’t count.

“Nathan!” Her scream melted with a loud shot. The birds, previously so comfortable in the crown of the high pines, flew away with a warning shriek. The dog got silent, the barking died when the metal shell hit the muddy ground.

The door, marked with a dark, obscure sign of explosion opened by itself with a loud screech inviting them grudgingly. Nathan laughed happily, pleased like a little boy who just cracked open a secret jar of cookies and rolled the pistol in his hand.

Victoria closed her eyes. They went too far. Goddamnit.

“What if he comes back?” She asked, seeing him kicking the door in and disappearing inside. No response was given so she followed him still prepared to turn back and hide in the safe space of the red SUV. The cramped inside saved them from the cold fog but welcomed with darkness and a terrible smell. The whole RV reeked with the odors of weed, beer, dust, rotten food and urine melting in a heavy stuffiness, making her nauseous and forced to choke on every taken breath. The expensive, designer’s clothes would smell like this mobile garbage for days, impregnated by the special drug dealer’s fragrance, straight from Arcadia Bay. Fucking Bowers’ edition.

“He won’t. He got an urgent fucking order and will be busy for a few hours...” Nathan grinned, strolling through an awfully dirty kitchen. Damn, he really planned it right. “A secret delivery for crying people. Fucking Blackwell can’t even get over a dead girl without some damn fix.”
They walked slowly strolling through the piles of garbage still ready for a furious attack of Frank’s
dog, but the animal disappeared in thin air. Nathan opened one of the top cabinets, throwing
everything on the floor. Some cans, utensils, brochures. Nothing significant.

“You don’t know if Kelly’s dead.”

A careless shrug was her only answer, when Nathan sat down by Frank’s desk and turned on his
computer. He clicked around, checked a few folders but quickly got bored and decided to search the
drawers by the pantry instead. Victoria, not extremely familiar with the secrets of technology, took
over, hoping her skirt wouldn’t get stained. The seat was probably never cleaned and who knew
what Frank was doing while relaxing in front of his PC. Disgusting fucking pig.

The content of the hard drive wasn’t surprising either. She found an obnoxious amount of porn,
carefully segregated by categories but obviously nothing about Amber between those filthy videos. It
would be so beautifully evil to discover her sex tape somewhere among this dirt, but Victoria knew it
was only wishful thinking.

“Speaking of crying people, are you going to the vigil?” She asked, checking his browser history,
but erotica was apparently the only interest that Frank had. Sex, dogs and food. Nothing else.

Men.

“I don’t give a shit about that whore.” Nathan opened the door to the bedroom and then his voice
became more soothing, almost friendly. “Hello there. Good boy, yes, good boy. You remember me?
Here. Here.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Ba careful. It could have fleas.”

Young Prescott scoffed, still trying to pet the scared animal. Bowers’ dog wasn’t as happy as he had
assumed, mostly growling and crying, showing his fangs and warning him not to come too close.
Nathan, so full of self-confidence, ignored the danger. Victoria sighed deeply hearing a threatening
bark, a vulgar hiss and a loud stir when the dog got kicked a few times and hid under the bed again,
whining.

“Nathan.” She scolded him quickly.

He didn’t respond, going though Frank’s bedroom now. Lurking quickly and seeing how dirty the
sheets were, Victoria didn’t even want to set her foot in this part of the RV. Nathan didn’t need her
help though, enjoying his messy search and throwing everything on the floor.

They worked in silence for a longer while.

Bored and tired of the disgusting odor, Victoria stood up finally wondering how to explore the rest of
the cabinets without touching anything. If she had known this place would be so filthy she would
wear a pair of gloves and even a safe suit. Literally everything was sticky and gluey from dirt. How
people could willingly function in such conditions not vomiting three times a day was beyond her.
On the other hand, perhaps that was why Frank always looked and smelled like shit.

“Did you find anything?” She yelled, so ready to leave this place.

“No… eh… maybe.” It took him a moment to answer. “There is something here, like a secret stash
or something. I need to pry it open though…”
She heard him struggling with metal and plastic, panting and gasping while struggling with another obstacle. Something was broken with a quick snap and then the room got quiet again. Curious about what Nathan had found, she lurked inside, noticing how occupied her friend was for the last couple of minutes. The only sound was coming from the bedroom was an impatient whisper of pages being turned. Victoria’s eyebrow rose when she saw Nathan sitting on the shockingly dirty carpet and browsing some papers.

“Did we get lucky?” She asked, almost ready to walk, despite her previous reservation. He didn’t react, still reading fast. His eyes were following the passages of text in fever. Next page. Next note. The page got turned again.

“Nathan?” Victoria frowned. “Nathan, is everything ok?”

He looked at her staggered, forgetting about her presence, her existence even. His hands, chin, even eyelids were trembling, the pulse was bulking his neck with a rapid pace. Whatever he found between Frank’s notes was so shocking that even if the owner of the RV showed up at the entrance, he would also be competently ignored. Nathan licked his lips. Victoria opened her hands in a silent question.

“So?” She asked sharply, not used to her demands being disregarded. “What is it? His dick pics or something?”

Getting up swiftly, Nathan tossed the papers on the night stand, turned around a few times like a lost puppy and spotting an old baseball bat he grabbed it quickly. Thankfully Frank preferred simple self-defense solutions, not keeping a loaded shotgun by his bed.

“Stop!” Victoria yelled when he hit the window once, then again. The shattered glass covered the old, dirty sheets, brown carpet, the mess on the floor. Nathan howled, howled like wild animal, screamed so loudly that her ear started ringing. Running away to the kitchen Victoria covered her head, hearing him smashing everything around. The lamp, the mirror, an old radio, a shelf, empty or half-full beer bottles. Victoria watched him with her jaw dropped.


Yet another window broke, bursting into glass raindrops. The nightstand, a mug, more bottles, a mirror. Nathan dropped the bat for a moment to rip off all the posters from the wall, all photos or scraps of paper decorating Bowers’ little lair. The bedroom quickly changed into a trashy battlefield, but it wasn’t enough. Nathan needed more. He rushed to the kitchen hitting the sink, breaking the dirty dishes to pieces, bending the faucet, smashing the open drawers, tearing out the cabinets’ doors.

“Nathan, calm down! Cam the fuck down!” Victoria, surrounded by the shattered wreckage and debris of Frank’s worthless property, woke up from the rigid shock realizing he was doing it for real, it wasn’t just a bad dream, a nightmare of a madman. Her friend wanted to destroy this place, crush it to pieces. Nothing was spared, not a single plate, no piece of plywood. The computer was next. Glass and metal parts scattered the floor.

Pompidou fled the scene stealthily, desperate to get the hell out. Slipping by the door, the running dog almost knocked Nathan down, but he didn’t even notice, still hammering, hitting and striking. Victoria, petrified and scared to death, was envying this beast so much, already far away from this chaos. She looked at her friend, a guy who she had known for years now. Recalling the gossips of his violent behavior, rumors about how unstable he could be, the Blackwell queen was experiencing his wrath for the first time in her life. No, not wrath—a meltdown. Nathan went absolutely bat-shit crazy. She had no idea who this insane, furious person in front of her was.
Help. He needed help. Professional help. Far away from her.

Suddenly Nathan walked to her, so agitated and furious, that she got scared he would hit her too. His intentions were way different though. The secret planner appeared in his hands as he tossed it to her panting wildly.

“Look! Look! Fucking stupid slut!” Young Prescott spat on the dirty carpet already covered by crushed pieces of something that was once an old, smelly RV.

She opened the notepad obediently and started to read, not really understanding how a few notes could get him so livid. It didn’t take much time for her to absorb the information though, to realize why her friend felt so hurt and betrayed, even if his rage was ridiculous. Wanting to know more, she riffled the planner impatiently, finally discovering the visual evidence.

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

Time stopped as the need for breathing. Nathan’s rage got so null and void, his screams and cries got ignored when Victoria was examining the evidence piece by piece not really believing her own eyes.

“Behind my back.” Nathan whined again. “She was doing it behind my back!”

“Behind Chloe’s back most likely…” Victoria murmured still shocked, but too distracted to focus on reading. It was more than she had ever hoped for. Way more. Too much. Browsing the proofs, going through the files, letters, notes, scribbles, she almost forgot about Nathan, who got to the front of the RV wrecking the dashboard and the driver’s seat. The baseball bat was almost broken in half, but Victoria was sure that young Prescott would rip this vehicle apart with his bare hands if his new favorite toy would fail him.

Scary. It was so fucking scary to see him like that.

It was time to go, her watch was urging them to get back. The planner was bigger than her purse, but Victoria managed to fit it in somehow. Escape. It was time to run away. Nathan wasn’t done yet though.

“Fucking dyke!” The screams kept getting louder. “Fucking whore!”

“Nathan!” She tried to calm him down, knowing Nathan couldn’t stay here alone. It was taking too long, Frank could show up at any moment. Crazy or not, Nathan would be murdered in cold blood after what he had done. Victoria really didn’t want to be part of this confrontation, especially after what they found and with a loaded gun involved. Damn, the gun. Oh my god, he was armed.

“We have to go.” She begged. “Please.”

A hand on his shoulder only made things worse. He pushed her back so hard she hit the kitchen counter, bruising her hip. Victoria lost her balance, almost falling to the floor. Nathan swayed the baseball bat wildly and she was sure he was aiming at her. Another cabinet got trashed instead.

“No one…” Smash. “No one…” Again. “Will tell me…” Smash. Smash. “…What to do!”

She opened her mouth, more shocked than hurt, and despite her previous hesitance ran to the door and stormed outside. Sinking in mud and stumbling over her high heels Victoria Chase walked as fast as possible to the asphalt road leaving Nathan behind, still hearing the song of more glass, wood and porcelain being smashed. Abandoning a friend in need wasn’t a noble thing to do but she was quite certain that this crazy monster inside wasn’t her friend anymore.
Tuesday lunch found them both in Blackwell’s cafeteria. Rachel promised to make out on every long break, but they got a decent dose of intimacy before getting up and weren’t really keen on freezing outside just for the sake of a kiss. Stealing a moment or two on the way home would suffice and if not, there were always other opportunities to make each other crazy. Since certain morning extensive activities didn’t let them to prepare for academic challenges, they had to drop their usual custom and dive into books and notes.

Chloe was too distracted to focus on her homework and every single math task she tried to occupy her mind with took forever to accomplish. Her handwriting became more and more hectic to the point that she wasn’t able to recognize the last number she wrote, Rachel was watching her above a paper coffee cup, sipping on the black beverage, already done with her preparation for the constitutional law class. It required more thinking than writing which she was grateful for especially seeing her girlfriend struggling.

It wasn’t only about school though.

Trying to cheer her up, she leaned over the table and scribbled a small note on the margin on the math textbook. ‘I love you so fucking much’ it stated and made her girl smile instantly. Chloe untied the pen from Rachel’s fingers and took her revenge, destroying her girl’s notes with doodle of a pirate flag with a heart around it. She was finishing the masterpiece adding some frantic shadows and additional cute little drawings, when Rachel was patiently caressing the top of her palm, waiting for the artist to finally stop ruining her homework.

“Rach… Can I ask you a question?” Chloe muttered, still focusing on the doodle which was growing extensively and eating up an important chunk of the text. The heart was surrounded by some serious declarations, written promises and pirate ships along with something that the law student wouldn’t be able to explain to her teacher if asked.

“Yeah? What’s wrong, baby?”

The blue graffiti artist sighed deeply and dropped the pen, but still didn’t raise her eyes, embarrassed by her own thoughts. It sounded so selfish and egocentric even in her head.

“Do you think… eh… that Kelly ran away from home because of me?”

Their eyes met, and Chloe noticed how soft the hazel gaze had gotten, how tender and sweet. Her girlfriend suspected a similar question for days now, sensing the weight of irrational guilt on Chloe’s shoulders and was very well-prepared to provide a mental massage to untie the knots of a nonsensical blame.

“Of course not. Baby…” The golden hair danced in a dim light of the cafeteria when Rachel shook her head standing up and sitting by Chloe’s side, hugging her lightly. It was way more uplifting to be closer, not to mention that playing with the blue hair on her neck was a pleasant bonus. “She got over you weeks ago. There was nothing about you in the letter she left. She just wanted to get out, leave Arcadia.”

Escaping this forbidden town was always their common dream but after Kelly going missing they hadn’t mentioned it even once. This case killed the fun, ruining their routine entirely, leaving them
empty-handed with their dream stolen by a tragedy. Even before, they didn’t talk much about leaving though. The trip to California had made them rethink a thing or two, not only in the running away department. Chloe, worrying about Max and still processing the moments of anguish while confronting her future father-in-law, dropped the plans about big questions and hidden treasures, giving up for now and postponing it for deeply in the future. There was no rush though, and with Kelly vanishing she had too much on her head to focus on yet another stressful but hopefully cheerful thing. The ring didn’t have an expiration date, wasn’t made of ice cream, wouldn’t melt down in the meantime. On the other hand, everything icy would be damn safe in this weather.

Having Rachel close was everything she wanted anyway, big questions or not.

“I know, but do you think that…” She tried to explain herself again, playing with Rachel’s necklace, freeing it from the blond locks. “Could I have done something to prevent this? Like stop her or talk her out of it?”

Her girl nodded, stroking her arm gently. The new leather jacket crackled pleasantly under her touch. Rachel smiled and winked. Her privilege of being gay was using her father’s credit card to spoil her girlfriend with expensive clothes without worrying that her parents would start asking questions. Chloe, even if resistant to accept this gift, was wearing it every single day making it her favorite piece of outfit. It felt good to take care of her also in this field, shielding her from the cold and rain with something that she would love. Pirates were obligated to wear sexy jackets anyway, not to mention Chloe looked so damn hot in leather. Rachel loved her in leather.

“I think you played this whole thing very tactfully and no one would do it better.” Rachel didn’t let the new look distract her from the more profound task. Peace of mind was more important than Hugo Boss. “Kelly just decided to elope, maybe boarding school wasn’t for her. Not your fault.” She brushed her lips, wrinkling her nose in a cute little smirk, but still staying serious.

Chloe was still avoiding her gaze, still shy and unsure. She could play tough and act careless, but her heart was made from pure gold.

“I wish she said something, like gave some sign that she wanted to run away.”

Rachel closed her palm in her hands, saving her necklace from being destroyed. It wasn’t easy to convince Chloe she wasn’t the one to blame for all the world’s problems, but she cared too much to give up.

“Remember when we wanted to escape? It was hella unplanned and Kelly even left a note.”

“We would leave a note too. Maybe. Probably.” It was a big fat lie. Chloe snorted. Short-tempered and obsessed with each other they just wanted their way out, not even thinking twice about the pain they might have caused. Thank god they failed. “I could have talked to her. Like more.” She admitted.

It felt so good to be able to share her concerns, especially with the dearest person on earth, free from a fear that she would be judged, laughed at or ignored. A few years ago, she wouldn’t dare to open up that much, especially being sober, but Rachel changed so much that Chloe almost completely forgot how impatient and mean her girlfriend could be. She was slowly getting used to this as her rebuilt trust was never let down.

“You did talk to her.” Rachel loved the rare moments when her girl let herself to show her vulnerable side ditching the rebellious attitude. She didn’t mind dating a bold pirate, oh she wouldn’t it trade for anything in this world and beyond, but it was nice to see the other side of Chloe, especially if served willingly. She was here to serve and defend, Amber special protection service. She was getting good
at this game. “You can’t force yourself to be friends with somebody. It happens naturally. She was crushing on you and you didn’t play it back. Not your fault. Not your fault, baby. I know it hit you hard even if you don’t want to admit it.”

Chloe looked at her finally. Damn, shy, cute teddy bear. “It’s so obvious, huh?”

“I’m just good with people, this particular one especially.” Rachel moved closer, almost sitting on her lap and poked her chest gently. “She is probably smoking some devil’s lettuce somewhere on the West Coast, don’t worry. The police will find her and drag her back, and then we will both kick her ass for being such a dickhead.”

The blue rebel couldn’t help but laugh at the perspective. The funny part was Rachel wasn’t really joking. Kelly would get an extensive lecture, after getting hugged and properly welcomed. Chloe already felt a little bit better.

“Promise?”

“Would I say no to kick some freshman’s ass? Trust me, a few more weeks and everything will be solved.” Rachel noticed that her girl didn’t finish her cheese sandwich. Distracted or not, it was her loss, the food wasn’t Chloe anymore. Eating somebody’s lunch was her special secret to stay in shape. Stolen calories didn’t count, but they always were drowned in ketchup. What was with Chloe and this tomato sauce? “Any plans for today? Do you want to go to the beach tonight?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Chloe sighed, wondering herself. It seemed important but waving candles along with Blackwell assholes wasn’t her thing, even if it was organized and planned by her dear friend. “Max wants us there, but it feels fake, you know?” She shrugged. “What about you?”

Rachel swallowed the last bite of the sandwich, avoiding an instantaneous response. Everybody had known she wasn’t Kelly’s best friend and probably half the school assumed that they had to argue once or twice over Chloe. Not showing up would actually create even more gossips and stupid rumors. Not that Rachel really paid attention to it, however she really felt for the girl’s family and the freshman’s well-being. Attending the vigil was the least she could do.

“Yeah, I think I should.” She admitted, hoping Chloe would join her after all. The beach would be so cold tonight. “Not for long though. I want to talk to Juliet about the drama club thing after, so we might grab a quick coffee in town. I might come back on stage after all.” Fuck, she forgot to tell her about it, damn it. “I hope you don’t mind…”

Sharing Rachel with others would be a hurtful thought a few months ago, but Chloe was actually liking the idea now. Her girl needed to get back on track, being involved with her own crowd doing things she loved. They felt safe about each other, getting stronger, even more dedicated every single day. Rachel was a charming prisoner, but her girl hated to keep her constantly jailed in her own arms and company. Months of being jealous and damaged after Frank marked them both deeply, but Chloe got rid of all the doubts and, to be honest, couldn’t wait to see Rachel in a play again. She wanted to feel proud of her, watching the performance and waiting backstage, knowing she would take this amazing creature home every single evening. Rachel Amber, theater star or not, was hers, full stop.

Where did her cheese sandwich go?

“I don’t mind. Just don’t force me to wear any stupid outfit this time.” It was supposed to be a snarky comment, but the morning memory was still vivid, and Chloe’s hand wandered on Rachel’s hips almost unconsciously. Her subtle gesture didn’t get unnoticed as her girl stretched lightly narrowing her eyes and leaned over, ready to tease, all in game. The leather jacket smelled so nice, and those
cold, autumn afternoons always required a lot of this particular amazing fire. It was pretty warming, way better than any fireplace.

“I will ask you gently to wear something... maybe not that stupid after.” Rachel murmured as she brushed Chloe’s lips with the top of her fingers, caressing her neck with an inviting whisper. “Or... I will dress up... For you.”

Chloe’s hand danced on Rachel’s waist, first just brushing over the belt, but then pulling her closer with a demanding and sharp move. Her girl smiled in response, pleasantly startled and tilted her head slightly. That was how the pirate wanted to play it? Fine. Chloe hesitated for a moment, inches away from the parted lips. The hazel spark could be extremely dangerous especially in the middle of Blackwell’s cafeteria.

“You’re such a bad girl.” The blue pirate murmured softly, when her hand traveled from Rachel’s waist to her thigh, drawing another doodle, this time no pirate flags or hearts included. Her artistic effort was welcomed with a quick and short buckle of her girl’s hips. Chloe purred lightly. The blue kitten rarely made an appearance, but it was a sound to live for.

“You love bad girls.” Another whisper tickled her ear.

“Only one.” Chloe lifted Rachel’s chin gently and kissed her with all the hidden passion woken up this morning. It was supposed to be just a simple and nonchalant caress, but her girl’s eager moan, even if subtle and barely hearable, made them forget about the school notes entirely. The blue rebel smiled against her lips, tangling her hand in the blond hair and pulling Rachel back for another kiss.

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Standing on the jagged concrete of Blackwell’s parking lot was probably the most amazing thing that happened in Victoria Chase’s life in a long time. First, she tried to get back to the school on foot but her high heels were making the walk a slippery torture. Fortunately, the hiking adventure didn’t last long as some lost tourist mercifully gave her a ride and an hour later than expected the Blackwell queen was able to get back home.

Nathan’s car was already there, parked in his usual spot, like he had never left the school grounds. His presence, even if not direct, made her anxious. Victoria didn’t really want to confront or even pass by her friend today, maybe not for a long time. Fuck, he really scared her and even the thought of a possible argument with young Prescott was terrifying. Nathan was always holding the reputation of an unstable rich brat, which she was aware of, but this time he crossed the line, burning the frail string of trust and faith she had in him.

At least she got the files. At least. Damn it.

The victory over Rachel Amber was so bittersweet. She got all the dirt but lost the closest person in exchange. There was no satisfaction, but a dull, throbbing uncomfortable distress instead, eating her alive, mocking her pathetic efforts and high expectations. Amber cheating on her girlfriend should be amazing news, but Victoria Chase felt like she already gave up the fight, even with the planner still in her purse, not exposed nor published, contemptuous with its weight and contents.

She shook her head heading to the dorms, hoping to vanish in her room, not bothered by any of her nosy friends. Missing some classes shouldn’t be a problem either, a lot of students ditched school today, helping to organize the vigil. It wasn’t even about Kelly Davis, it was about avoiding the boring lectures and doing something different.
Her purse was so heavy, Victoria had to stop for a moment. Her legs were still shaking after what she experienced, going through hell in the old RV. Stretching slowly she heard somebody yelling. Somebody yelling at her.

“Hey, hey! I’m talking to you! Hey!” Victoria’s heart jumped, and she started to walk fast, trying to escape the parking lot. Stumbling on her own steps she realized it was too late, he would get to her anyway, he would catch her, crush her, punish her.

Frank. Frank was here. Running. In her direction. Oh god.

Feeling his heavy hand on her shoulder Victoria almost screamed. He crossed her path and stopped her in place, grasping on her coat, not letting her to hide behind the safe wall of Blackwell’s fence. What was safe anyway? Bowers could get to her even in the dorms.

“I’m busy… I can’t… really talk right now…” She tried to avoid him, with her head up and exalt smirk, but the trembling corners of her lips were betraying her confidence. Did he see what Nathan did? Did he know about her involvement?

Fuck. Damn. Fuck.

“Not so fast, bitch.” Frank pulled her to the further corner of the parking lot, where the young kids hide with their illegal smokes. No one would find them there, not in the middle of the day. “Somebody fucking trashed my RV today and I think you know who did it. Answers. I want answers. Now!”

She noticed how dirty his hands were, with the tips of his fingernails completely black. How could Amber stand this filthy pig in her bed? Fucking degenerates, both of them.

“Do I look like somebody who would do such a thing?” Straightening up and putting an act of an innocent and concerned school girl was the best card Victoria could play, even if the acting skills were pretty poor. If you think I’m capable of…”

Frank Bowers didn’t care about her silly excuses. Shaking her like a rag doll he hissed, then spat on the ground, not willing to negotiate. Not smitten by her attitude or supposed popularity, he ignored her frantic efforts to get off his grip. Sure, she could try. It would be nice to watch.

“You look like a bitch that would do anything to get stuff she wants.” This fucking kid thought she was something special. He would show her special. “Who did it?” He yelled at her with such force, she almost hunched over, protecting her purse. Frank scoffed. This bitch really thought he would steal her little pinky wallet? “You gonna tell me what I want, or I will fucking make you.”

“I don’t know!” She cried, blinded by fear. “I really don’t. Please…” When begging didn’t work she tried to push him away, even if he didn’t blink seeing her struggle. “For fuck’s sake… Let me go!”

A knife appeared in his hand out of nowhere. The blade jumped out of the handle with a quiet swoosh and glittered with a sharp edge of steel in the afternoon sunlight. It was probably the only clean thing he owned though. Victoria gasped, and then wheezed loudly looking around in desperation hoping that somebody would notice them, protect her, save her. It was the school’s parking lot, where is the security when she needed it.

No one was around though. She couldn’t be saved.

“Who did it? Who the fuck did it?” The blade got so close to her face she could feel its coldness. “Tell me or I will fucking make your life way less beautiful! Was it fucking Price?”

Chloe. Victoria blinked. Blaming the blue trash was the last thing she could think of. She opened her mouth to deny his accusation but no sound or even breath escaped her lips. Framing Price would be so wrong on so many levels and the scraps of decency stopped her from doing so.

Frank noticed his hesitation and straightened his grip almost lifting her from the ground.

“Who!?”

She looked into his eyes, understanding he wasn’t joking. Frank Bowers without his RV, without his home and his dog and robbed out of the dearest memories of his life, had nothing to lose. This knife could slit her throat in a second, parking lot or not. He just didn’t care anymore.

“Leave me alone!” It was supposed to be a scream, a firm statement, filled with her anger in displaced, but Victoria’s voice sounded more like the whinnying of a kicked dog.

“Who? Was it Chloe?” The blade was caressing her cheek, pressing the skin with its dull edge. “Was it this fucking whore?”


“Yes!” Victoria yelled to his face to finally make it stop. “Yes…” She repeated, feeling how the cold kiss of steel was leaving her skin. “It was Chloe… Chloe Price.”

Why did she decide to protect Nathan? She could yell his name as easily as Chloe’s, make it even, hit two birds with one stone, let those two madmen kill each other. Frank wouldn’t believe her though. He had picked Price anyway, blaming her for everything regardless. Those two had some personal issues, and Victoria was perfectly aware who started the beef between them. If Frank and Price wanted to fight over Amber it wasn’t her business, right?

Right?

The knife vanished in his hand as suddenly as it appeared, swooshed back to its folded and harmless stage. Frank choked and spit on the ground, still with his bloodshot eyes narrowed. The vicious dog hid his nasty fangs, got the bone he wanted. Victoria wasn’t sure if he believed her, but it was way too late to come up with another lie, something more convenient.

Poor fucking Price.

“I knew it. I fucking knew it.” She heard him saying to himself, when he released her from his filthy grip. Frank pushed her lightly and turned around, not even bothered if she would report him or call the police. He probably assumed it would happen anyway, but he didn’t care, done with the games entirely. Done with pretending shit.

It was time to get back to what was his.

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It was just a simple note on a pink paper, a few doodled hearts, a couple of sentences, nothing big, nothing meaningful. She remembered when this letter was handed to her, how nervous and embarrassed she was. A memory. A sign of a girl, who was somewhere or nowhere. Now, looking at the blurred letters Chloe was pretty glad she hadn’t thrown out Kelly’s letter, stashing it in the
memory drawer among concert tickets, some old photographs and pieces of her journal. A drawer she barely opened, usually to add another recall or to browse her past from time to time, but never getting rid of any of the things. Even if damaged by ocean water and barely readable, the sweet note had been saved and placed in the secret stash. It would feel wrong to throw it out anyway, disposing of somebody’s hopes and dreams.

She closed the drawer, walking to the closet instead. The idea to change before the evening event wasn’t stupid but she had been always terrible at dressing up for the occasion and her best adviser had to stay late at school attending yet another pre-law lecture. Her first thought was to dress up in black, but damn, Kelly was missing, not dead. Showing up at the vigil with her usual clothes didn’t feel right either. Chloe was looking at her side of the closet. She had never paid attention to her appearance, being a faithful supporter of only one style, not differing or alternating much. So maybe something from Rachel’s side then? Her girlfriend wouldn’t mind.

Rachel’s favorite blue shirt was nowhere to be seen. The blue piece of clothing was too short and way too small, but it always made Chloe felt better, loved and protected. She wanted to feel better now, she might need it more during the candle thing. The messy search wasn’t successful, and the blue rebel had to admit she had no idea where this damn shirt was. Shrugging and done with the fashion concerns she picked something simple and ordinary, too impatient to struggle with this issue more. Putting the leather jacket on, she was almost ready to go when the door to her room opened slightly.

“One of my guns is missing. Did you take it?” Her stepfather walked in, not really remembering about the custom of knocking. Chloe frowned, surprised by his firm question. What was he talking about?

Oh fuck. The gun! She almost forgot about this piece of shit. The Smith & Wesson which Chloe had borrowed almost a month ago and never put back in place was still in her truck, tucked somewhere in the glove compartment. She never intended to keep it, but the whole madness with Max, the trip to the old barn and running around in the dark forest would make everybody forgetful. Although it was quite startling that David hadn’t noticed it earlier.

“Oh fuck. Yes. I did.” Rubbing her neck and moving nervously in place was as meaningful as verbal confession, but she decided to back it up with some speaking. Honesty was usually being generous for her, why not to try with David. “Sorry. I’m really sorry that I took it and I didn’t tell you. I knew you’d give me shit and I really needed it, you know, for protection. Won’t happen again, it was just a fucked up situation and it was unloaded the whole time.”

Speaking as fast as possible was supposed to release the tension, water it down in a storm of words, but Chloe expected an argument anyway. The only question was, how big of a fight it would be. Getting shit from her stepfather wasn’t on her to-do list, but the world hated her with a passion today. Strangely, David just nodded and looked at her very carefully.

Eh, shouldn’t he be angry and shit?

“He sighed softly, which was way more shocking that hearing him yell. “I know that the situation at school has been tense and you might feel unsafe, but I don’t want you to carry a gun for your protection, especially when you are on campus. If you really need protection, come to me. I don’t want you... or Rachel to get into any kind of trouble.”

Kelly. Yeah, she got it now. David got heavily involved with the investigation, bringing the upsetting news home every day, obsessed with this case even more than Max. He shared his angry statements during every dinner, complaining about laziness and unprofessional actions of the law enforcement and suspecting the worst possible scenario. His rants about security cameras, the
treacherous secrets of the campus and Wells’ stubbornness were yet another reason why her and Rachel preferred to stay away from the dorms. Something weird was going on in that school.

“Yes, sir.” He usually didn’t like her mocking an army salute, but this time a short smirk was the only response.

“I mean it.” David pointed at her, and seeing her laughing, shook his head firmly. “Don’t you steal it again. Here.” A bundle of green papers landed in her hand. “That’s for the Dodge. You did good. We got a good price. You earned it. Don’t spend it all on... you know... stuff.”

They had finished the project over a week ago, but Chloe entirely forgot about the old wreck which they resurrected paying the high price of blood and sweat, yelling enough profanities at each other to make half of the town deaf or disgusted. It felt good that somebody was driving this vintage shit.

They did good though.

“Whoa.” She looked at the pile of dollar bills in her hand. Some hundreds, some fifties, a lot of freaking cash. “Thanks. And about the gun…” It felt weird to feel guilty, especially in front of him. “I will put it back today, no worries.”

David nodded again, and cleared his throat, also a little uncomfortable, hiding his face in the shadow of the official Blackwell security cap. They tried for years to have a decent relation with each other, and now, when it finally started to happen, he felt out of place. The feeling was mutual though.

“Alright. I have go to work.” He changed the subject swiftly. “I heard you guys have a special event for Kelly today. Do you need my presence?”

“Nah, I think we will be fine. Thanks though.”

He left without a smile nor long reprimand, tired of yet another extra shift at work. Chloe blinked, looking at the money, then at the door, and at the money again. Not sure of what to do with her surprising wealth, she stuffed the bills in one of her jacket’s pockets. No one had ever handed her that much cash at once. Nice and sweet boost for her self-confidence. Making money was kinda nice after all.

The gun. Damn. She had to remember to put it back today.

The house got empty again and Chloe started to rush. Not only because the sun was about to go down and she didn’t want to be late much to the vigil, but suddenly the wealthily blue pirate felt awfully lonely. She wanted to see Rachel again, she wanted to make sure her angel was safe. There was so much on her mind lately, first Max, then Kelly, then Max again, the weird tension at school and all that shit. It was time to stop, get back on track, take care of her own life and her own girl. Kelly was missing, true, but it was time to move on, sort things out.

The secret treasure was still in her secret drawer, stashed between the papers and photos. She grabbed it quickly and put it back in her pocket. The right moment would have to come soon, or she would fucking make it come.

Chloe ran downstairs, closed the door, grabbed her car keys and walked to the truck patiently waiting in front of the garage. She hoped that the old dead beat wouldn’t complain today, otherwise she would be damn fucking late. The day, even if marked with the upcoming storm wasn’t that grey and overcast anymore.

“Price.”
She turned around and got stiff immediately. Paralyzed.

“What do you want, Frank?”

He looked bad, worn out and lost, with his clothes even more dirty than usual and hair tangled in sweat. His uneven steps proved he was probably drinking the whole day and it wasn’t the first afternoon he had started that way. His face, marked by the net of wrinkles, small scars and liver marks, showed very plainly how careless he became, inert and listless about his own well-being. Drained and tired Frank Bowers was still dangerous though. Threatening and unpredictable.

“Oh, you know what.” He sniffed and moved closer almost stumbling over his own feet. “You had to do it right? You had to fucking take it.” Frank lost his game in the middle of his speech, pointing at her. “You had no fucking right!”

Something moved around his hand, flashing with light blue fabric. Chloe blinked and narrowed her eyes. It was fucking impossible, it was just a bad dream, an illusion, a trickery. She had never paid that much attention to what he was wearing on his wrist, but when Frank pointed at her and his sleeve went up in a rapid move, the secret got revealed in its full painful glory.

“I had the full right!” She stated, overwhelmed by the discovery to the point that she didn’t pay much attention to what he was so ire about. His speech was sloppy and mumbled, it was hard to understand the exact words, not to mention the meaning behind them. The anxiety and panic that hit when Chloe saw his face vanished in a second, replaced by wrenching doubt, a painful distress and rage, pure heated wrath. “The bracelet. You have Rachel’s bracelet… How the fuck did you get her bracelet?!”

Ignoring the comment about the blue band, he took a few steps toward her. Chloe instinctively leaned over her truck, securing her back. Frank blinked watching her in silence. It wasn’t the right time and place to discuss how he got it and how he couldn’t take it off, addicted to the touch of the blue fabric. This little bitch, so proud and self-confident, so sure of herself in this new shinny jacket, took her away from him, destroyed his livelihood, trashed his property and now she wanted some answers? Fuck that.

“You fucking clueless whore.” Frank scoffed, still trying to tame his anger, hoping to sober up a little bit more. He had to take a few shots after the meeting with this slut, Victoria. Stupid sophisticated bitch had really played on his nerves. One drink changed to another and half a bottle later he had to confront another kid. What a fucking kindergarten. “You think you can just show up and take whatever you want?”

Was he talking about Rachel? Did he finally decide to complain about his lost chances? Why now? Why not six months ago? Chloe wanted to think rationally, hold this discussion in a civil manner but logic was failing her, replaced by anger.

“Leave me alone.” She just said and was about to turn to her truck, but he came closer, pulling the leather sleeve sharply. “Back off!” Chloe warned releasing smoothly from his grip hand watching him closely. Frank didn’t make another attempt to touch her but didn’t back off still standing close. Too close. “I said back off, asshole!” It was her home, her garage and her truck. She had to stand her ground. “What do you want me to tell you? I don’t want to fight over this. It’s done. We are done.” Chloe took a step aside getting away from him, just enough to take a grasp of fresh air.

“Fight?” She could smell the beer and cheap smokes in his breath, hear the annoying panting, while his rage was building up. Fuck, he was getting angry. “Bitch, I didn’t start it!”

Maybe it was barely a visible sneer, maybe the fact that he decided to confront her in front of her
own place, or perhaps it the sight of the dirty blue bracelet on his right wrist, but Chloe pushed him back powerfully, and stood up with her fists clenched up, challenging him, calling him out with every more, ready for a clash. She wanted it, she wanted it so badly. It was way too prolonged.

He wanted to fight over Rachel? Fine. They had both strived for it for months.

“You didn’t?” She snorted. “That’s fucking interesting. You stole my girlfriend!” It was her turn to point at him. “You just used her and stuffed her with fucking drugs to the point that she didn’t know who she was anymore!”

Frank laughed. The blue bracelet moved around his wrist when he scratched his arm. It was disgusting seeing it on him, how naturally he was wearing it, not bothered by how important it was.

“She wanted to be with me, you fucking dyke. She wanted it.” He grinned not in a pleasant way. “She still wants it.” Frank added, pleased to watch her struggling with her own distrusts. Yeah, Chloe might have gotten her, but she didn’t know the whole truth. She didn’t know about the stuff between them.

The blue rebel was so close to slap him, to hit him with full force, but she couldn’t cross this line, couldn’t start it. Frank’s smile, the bold grimace of a drunk was making her livid, unstoppable, and wayward. How could she even have been afraid of this pathetic fucking drunk? How could she have even called him a friend?

She pushed him as strongly as she could. Frank staggered in surprise, almost losing his balance.

“You fucking wish.” Chloe hissed, empowered by the outcome, and pushed him yet again, so close to actually slap his swollen face, wipe out the annoying smirk. “I love her and she loves me. I know it. She proved it in a million ways.” He laughed again in a hostile and inimical way, not really touched by her declaration. Fucking pig couldn’t understand. “You were just a mistake, Frank. A fucking sad, terrible mistake for both of us. And…” She was losing it, she was dangerously close to the edge now. “I thought you were my fucking friend!” Chloe yelled finally.

A cold shrug of a drunk was her only answer.

“Don’t play the victim card, Price. Doesn’t fit you.” His voice cracked in a croak, when he remembered what brought him here in the first place, and it wasn’t Rachel. He got angry again, clenching his fists and stepping forward. This bitch wouldn’t push him around. “All that whining doesn’t explain what you did! You didn’t have to fucking wreck your rage like that, you angry whore. Whatever you think you have with her, whatever you think it is, don’t mess with me, Price.”

“Or what?”

“Or you will regret the day you were born. Give me back what’s mine!”

His hands were shaking way more when he dragged out his knife, opening it quickly. This should scare her, should be enough to get what he wanted.

“Over my fucking dead body.” Price didn’t seem intimidated by the naked blade though, too furious to notice the danger. As far as she was concerned he could put this knife up his own ass, folded or not. “She is mine! She’s been always mine!”

The sharp blade waved in his hand, swirling in the air unsurely. Frank hesitated for a second, knowing that threatening with a weapon was one thing, but using it was another. On the other hand, she thought that her little thing with Rachel could justify her actions. Bitch.
“Yeah, tell yourself that.” The grey concrete pavement got marked again by his dark spat. “Give me that back!” He was so close to losing it, to rip off the last fucking string of the patience leash that was holding him back.

Chloe Price, the kid he remembered when she had been just fifteen, so lost and depressed, so clumsy and scared of her own shadow, now standing her ground and crossing her arms on her chest, looked at him with cold sureness and stated boldly:

“No.”

He hit her. It wasn’t just a slap with an open hand or a violent bump. It was a full fist crashing on her face, cutting skin and making her head cold and shaky. Chloe lost her balance, slamming the car door with a loud clatter. If not the truck, she would be lying on the wet, solid pavement completely harmless, maybe even unconscious. Shaking her head still in shock she felt something wet covering her face and when she touched her jaw checking if it was still whole, her fingers got red from the creeks of blood coming from her broken lips and cut eyebrow. She looked at Frank in disbelief, realizing he wasn’t done with her yet. Driven to the edge, the infamous drug dealer was just starting, getting ready to beat out the crap of her.

Chloe was never afraid of fighting, always finding her way out, even if the opponent was stronger, older and taller. This time was different though. It wasn’t about taking a few blows and hiding in a corner giving up in a peaceful gesture of raising hands. It was about who would walk away alive. Alive. Jesus Christ, he was about to kill her.

Frank jumped to her way faster than she expected, but somehow, she managed to open the car and get inside. The old rusty door got blocked with his arm when he caught her leg and panted angrily trying to drag her out of the truck. Chloe yelled sharply kicking him in the face, but he didn’t lose his grip, on the contrary. The glove compartment, her only solution was fingers away, she tried to kick him again, hissing loudly. A stroke of his fist to her lower back was his only response. She almost screamed in pain, but a short, excruciating spasm let her move further inside the car probably saving her damn, poor life. The fucking glove compartment had to be within her reach now, but she couldn’t see, blinded by her unruly hair and blood dripping from her forehead. Her fingers scratched the surface trying to open the damn lock in panic. Frank pulled her legs again, dragging by the suspenders always nonchalantly hanging by her waist, persistent in his wrath, frantic and desperate. The thick leather jacket resisted the sharp blade of his knife, when he tried to cut her back. Disappointed, Frank tossed the weapon away, focusing on getting her out. Chloe almost lost the grip, choking on a painful howl when he striked again. Holding the old and worn out seat she was able to resist, but not for long.

Completely eaten out by his on rage, by all the emotions and lost hopes he had been holding inside for so long, Frank mumbled something and pulled again. It was a lost fight anyway, he knew who Rachel had chosen and raging over it was making the situation even more pathetic. She was just a fucking kid, they both were just kids. Kids. He tried to drag her out again and almost succeeded. Chloe hit her head on the dashboard, resisting fiercely, angry and scared, but this time she was able to open the damn compartment. Oh god, the Smith&Wesson was still there, between the parking tickets, debris of food packaging and other trash. She reached desperately and grasped her fingers on the handle in the last scrap of second.

She felt being dragged out, this time for good. Her head got hit again, this time by the steering wheel, as her blue hair whirled in a wild dance with the drops of blood. Her whole body got frozen for a moment, like the blow to her head swapped some magical switch turning her into a freaking fridge. Everything was happening so fast, the seat, the door, another blow, then the pavement, and his hands
were so close to her throat. Frank was about to kill her here and there, he was about to kill her because of Rachel. Rachel. Sunshine. Rach. And then he noticed the gun.

Staggering he took a sharp step back, raising his hands subconsciously. Chloe was breathing heavily, still terribly dizzy while she slowly stood up aiming the gun at him, leaning over the truck for support. Her body was shaking so much that it was a miracle the revolver was still in her hands.

“You wouldn’t dare.” Frank said only but looked around quickly, unsure if they were still alone. Moving nervously in place, he knew that all his advantage was lost. The steel barrel in front of his eyes worked like a cold shower, waking up the senses, rational thinking, sobering him up for good. Mistake. It was a fucking mistake. Price was armed. It was time to leave this freaking kid alone and get back another day.

He would come back for sure.

Chloe pulled the hammer back and placed her finger on the trigger, panting and wheezing hastily, trying to brush off her hair with a sharp move of her head. She felt so lightheaded immediately, almost losing her balance and falling to her knees. Long blue strokes were covering her eyes, making the world even more blurry and uneven.

“Try me.” She hissed, spitting the blood from the broken lip.

“Bitch, look at yourself.” Frank lowered his hands, feeling so damn lost. “You think you are tough, you think you can deal with everything. You are just a fucking kid, Price. But one day...” His finger pointed at her, the bracelet moved abruptly around his wrist. Chloe swallowed hard. “One fucking day... You will pay for all of this.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” Her throat was so dry that every word, every breath was a throbbing burning torture. Chloe had always thought it would be so easy to threaten somebody with a fucking revolver. It always seemed so easy. Wrong. “Get the fuck out of here, Frank. Get the fuck out and never come back.” She managed to say, vomiting the words through chattering teeth.

He looked at her one more time and spat on the ground again. Chloe was sure he would try to take the gun away from her, seeing by the corner of her eye his hand reaching for the barrel. Did he notice how light the weapon was? Did he know it wasn’t loaded?

She closed her eyes and seized the grip as hard as her body let her. Her finger was so close to pull the trigger, to blow up the whole cover, revealing it was just an act, a performance. Chloe was so scared she would do it by accident, leaving herself even more helpless and unarmed. Frank would never let her go if he had known the weapon wasn’t loaded. Frank would fucking kill her for sure, beating her to death with her own gun. Chloe wished David was here to solve this, to help, to shield her somehow. She was praying for her fucking stepfather to come back, for the presence of an asshole she hated most of her life.

Her ears were ringing, her head pounding, and only pure adrenaline and fear were keeping her standing. With her eyes still closed she could swear she heard steps, a human being walking. Was he coming closer? Was somebody else approaching them? Scared to death Chloe lost any sense of direction when every fiber of her being was a definition of panic. Death. Death was so close. Hers or his.

She had to look at him, she had to know what was going on. She couldn’t just stand here like little kid, praying for the best. She had to face him. Get a grip, Price. For your own sake. For Rachel.

When Chloe opened her eyes, Frank was nowhere to be seen.
She gasped on air once, then again, not sure if that was a dream or if he indeed decided to leave her alone. Sniffling and choking, Chloe got into the car, jumped on the driver’s seat, blocked the door quickly, put the gun by her side and let herself to cry desperately, sobbing hard when tears and blood were marking the steering wheel.

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The first fire got lit up just after sunset, when the beach was still warm from the dying sun, preparing itself for the stormy nightfall. Over one hundred students of Blackwell Academy, high school as well as college, came tonight, despite the Principal’s displeasure, raising the candles in the dark in the name of Kelly Davis. The event, even if not widely advertised, attracted not only people who knew the missing girl personally, but also complete strangers, and even inhabitants or Arcadia Bay. It was a beautiful gesture, and everybody hoped that prayers and good thoughts would help somehow, and the girl would come back soon, safe and sound.

When Rachel got to the beach, Alyssa was standing on an improvised stage reading a poem. It took her only a few seconds to recognize one of Robert Frost’s most famous work. It was nice that Max and everybody else involved in the project tried to make it more poetic, but the crowd wasn’t amused by this selection, tired of the classical works forced on them at school. It was too early to get bored though.

She looked around trying to find Chloe and not being able to spot her, reached for her phone yet again. Rachel called her girlfriend at least three times messaging her over and over, but not a text nor a single callback marked her notifications. She tried again, hoping to hear the familiar ringtone somewhere in the crowd but either the blue pirate didn’t get here yet or her mobile was silenced. It wasn’t unusual for Chloe to be late, but this event seemed very important to her. Maybe something at home stopped her or maybe the truck was dying again, refusing to start. The wreck her blue treasure drove was truly breathing worse every day, choking on its own guts. The serious renovation early this year didn’t help much, it was about time for a new engine or, unfortunately, a different car. That would upset Chloe though. Rachel, who loved the old truck with her whole heart, also really wanted to keep it in the family, but the reality was cruel though. It was time for a change, whether they liked it or not.

“Hi Steph, have you seen Chloe?” She finally spotted a familiar face, lit up only by the trembling spots of candles and flames of the burn barrels, strategically placed around the site. Not a bad idea concerning the weather. Their breaths were already smudging the air with the soft glow of frozen inhale.

Gandalf the gay hugged her fast, careful not to stain them both with the white melted wax.

“No, I haven’t. Is everything ok?”

“She forgot how to answer her phone.” Rachel smirked, not really worried much. The truck or typical pirate delay were valid excuses, even if being here alone wasn’t enjoyable. She looked around, admiring the view of hundreds of flames, flickering in a simultaneous breath of a pacific pant. “Thank you for doing this. It’s really beautiful.”

“Thanks.” Steph whispered back, trying not to disturb much. Her role in the event was pretty small but she knew Rachel was referring to her girlfriend’s effort more than her own involvement, pretty pathetic to be honest. Even if she provided the best sound equipment possible, Alyssa’s mic was cracking constantly, and her voice was barely hearable. Damn open site. Steph sighed miserably,
trying to take her mind of the stage-managing issue. “I wish I knew Kelly better though. Max wanted me to say something about her and nothing came to my mind.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Rachel nodded, standing by her side, appreciating the performance and trying to catch every single word, eaten up by the unyielding breeze. The evening was warning them clearly of an upcoming storm, but she hoped that the rain would kindly wait till the end of the vigil.

The minutes stretched into hours, getting longer and colder along with the shadows and Rachel got impatient, still not being able to spot Chloe. While she was scrutinizing the crowd she noticed Victoria, who was holding some kind of notepad close to her chest like her life was depending on it. Her biggest enemy and supposed competition avoided any kind of eye contact, usually so bold and unflinching in the silent wrestles. Rachel didn’t believe that the fashion snake would actually feel upset because of Kelly’s case, but Victoria had apparently a very bad day today, not really enjoying her event coordinator’s role as she typically was used to. Nathan, her annoying and usually useless guardian, brother from another mother, wasn’t present, which was even more odd. Young Prescott didn’t miss any social event, cheerful or not, always trying to show off.

Interesting.

Steph excused herself and walked to Max, who appeared suddenly between the trembling flames. Their hands met and a short, reassuring kiss was served, and that made Rachel feel so lonely, longing for Chloe even more. Grateful to see her among the students, Max smiled sadly and waved with a greeting unspoken. They didn’t share a word, since the performance was in progress and the forest of whispering comments was already growing among the crowd. Alyssa jumped offstage and another girl took her place. Rachel focused on the speech, noticing that it was actually somebody who knew Kelly and was sharing some bittersweet story about how the two had met. She sighed, wondering if this girl actually cared about the disappearance and tragedy behind it, or just wanted to steal some of the spotlight. Judging by her giggle and annoying way of expressing herself, it was the latter, but people reacted differently in a moment of distress. Maybe Kelly’s friend felt guilty, like most people who interacted with the poor freshman, Chloe included.

Rachel also was blaming herself. Not much, not as much as Chloe, but the spike of guilt was there, even if ridiculous and silly. She had never confronted Kelly in a fierce manner, never had the need to do so, but her jealousy had taken over too many times and she was perfectly aware of the fact that the young freshman was afraid of her. It was supposed to just be a play, a typical high school war over the girl she was dating and territory she was marking but now it seemed even more childish and unnecessary. Rachel scoffed quietly, not keen on admitting she was all abroad. That kind of remorse wouldn’t help Kelly Davis anyway. The situation required action, not a freaking contemplation.

Watching the performance, she noticed that Mark Jefferson was also there, representing the Blackwell faculty, standing close to the VIP area and encouraging the students but not speaking himself. It was strange since he and Kelly had talked a lot and he would be able to tell more about her than most of the people present. Perhaps Wells had forbidden him to do so, but it was very nice of him to show up at this semi-legal gathering. Max was still avoiding him like the plague, now even more than before, but the Vortex club couldn’t miss the opportunity to invite the handsome teacher. Rachel looked at him for a moment and he caught her sight smiling kindly. She smiled back, surprised, suddenly feeling a cold shiver running through her spine. The flame on her candle whirled and reeled on the gust of wind, almost stifling it down, but she covered the fire with her hand walking deeper in the crowd. Max could be crazy accusing this teacher of some weird, imaginary crimes, but this time Rachel Amber decided to follow her instinct along with Chloe’s friend’s advice.

Another friend and another poem. A few cute stories, yet another confession. One kid wrote a song
for Kelly. This girl had a lot of friends, why was no one was aware of her problems and anxieties? Rachel wondered how she would react getting back and hearing about all the performances. This event should be helpful but felt more and more like a funeral.

The vigil was slowly coming to its end and her girlfriend was still nowhere to be seen. Rachel noticed that more students decided to go home, leaving the beach more dark and empty. No one was to blame though. Everybody had classes tomorrow and the weather was becoming more and more stormy. She blew out the candle and rushed through the crowd looking for Chloe one more time. Another text message didn’t help either, no phone calls were missed, so Rachel started to worry.

“Hi Rach, still want to grab a coffee?” A familiar voice stopped her half-step. She turned around smiling to Juliet who was apparently suffering greatly from the cold ocean breeze and wouldn’t mind drinking something hot.

“Sure.” Rachel nodded, pretending she didn’t forget about their plans for today. “Promise is a promise, right?” She looked around again hoping to notice the familiar beanie, a glimpse of blue hair, the sexy leather jacket. Nothing, but it was so damn dark anyway. Chloe, where the hell were you?

“Is everything alright?” Juliet tried to frown but her teeth were playing a chattered melody of a frozen human being who had only one wish – leave this place as soon as possible.

“Yeah, just some communication problems.” Rachel embraced her shoulder hoping to warm her up a little. This girl was literally shaking, not really prepared for such a freeze. It was late October for crying out loud. Juliet should really get her winter coat out of the closet already or find a girlfriend who would sponsor her a new one. Getting sick wasn’t supposed to be part of her plans, especially if she was serious about scoring one of the main roles in the Shakespeare play. “Let’s bail.” Rachel decided on dropping the scraps of hope to find her girl here. Damn you, Chloe. They would have to have a serious talk later.

Victoria Chase rose her eyebrow seeing them in an embrace and walking off the beach heading to the parking lot. Rachel rolled her eyes not letting Juliet go. Tori was gifted with such a vivid imagination, especially when it came to other people’s business and relationships. The one time she showed up without Chloe and this bitch was probably already plotting something sinister, up to no good.

There was something different in Victoria’s look this time, something concerning and abnormally peculiar. Like she had learned something about Rachel, gotten under her skin, crawled into her thoughts and memories.

Weird.

“I have so much to tell you, you have no idea!” Fortunately, Juliet didn’t notice or was absolutely not bothered by Victoria’s vigilant gaze. The drama club kids didn’t really pay that much attention to her games anymore, learning their own ways of survival in Blackwell’s jungle and one of the first rules was to stay away from the Vortex clique.

“I can’t wait to hear it, seriously.” Rachel winked and lurked at her phone again. Still silent, still tacit. Damn. “I can’t wait.”
“Nathan, I won’t accept you avoiding me. I called you twice and you didn’t get back to me. This is unacceptable.” His mentor, his teacher, his whole world was sitting on the leather couch not even looking at him, occupied by his art, but still angry, upset, disappointed.

Nathan moved slowly, trying to hide his hands marked with red scratches and bruises in the deep sleeves of his jacket. It was always so cold in the darkroom, not with the ocean breeze, not with a forest’s wind, but with the artificial stillness of the high art. He didn’t have to ask or explain to know that Jefferson knew what he had done today, how he had lost his mind wrecking this RV, how he couldn’t keep it together, how he failed as a man, as an artist, as a partner.

As a human being.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Mark.” Nathan almost sobbed, knowing well that crying was strictly prohibited. Jefferson hated seeing people crying, even if they were about to become objects. It was forbidden territory, cursed land.

“Is this about the girl?” His teacher looked at him finally, rising from his seat. Perhaps it was his imagination, but he seemed slightly concerned. Nathan gasped in surprise. Mark cared. Mark was always caring about him, but never showed any signs of affection.

Affections were fake. Affections were for the weak ones.

“Kelly?” He mumbled.

Jefferson scoffed, closing the red binder marked with the name that was still resonating among the steel wall of their secret room.

“Kelly is not a girl anymore and we won’t speak of her now or never, do you understand me?” He tossed the files on his desk, but then his tone of voice got more cautious, more suspicious. “I’m talking about Rachel. Rachel Amber. You are getting obsessed about her and I don’t like it. I told you many times she’s no object material, nothing good would come out of this and it would be just a waste of time and effort. We can’t afford any more mistakes. Do you hear me? Not a single one.”

“This whore… This fucking whore.” Nathan whimpered suddenly. Seeing those photos, stupid snaps, not even close to an art he was trained to do drove him to the edge. “She was banging this pig, Frank, behind my back! She was sucking his fucking dick and pretending she was the fucking dyke the whole time!”

Jefferson sighed and shrugged, like it was not a big deal, like he knew from the get-go or expected it at least. It was partly true. Mark had never trusted any of those girls, and Rachel Amber, even if gifted with an interesting personality, wouldn’t be an exception. The fact that she had a dark secret made her even less worthy and, strangely, even more fascinating. He couldn’t say it to Nathan though. The young man needed a straight guidance, not an ambivalent conclusion.

“I understand your agitation, Nathan, but you have calm down. Now!” He rose his voice again seeing the first sign of a helpless cry. One more vulnerable blink and this boy would be punished. Punished hard. “They all are whores anyway, you knew it from the beginning. That’s why you will never be able to make this superior connection, this special bond with any of them. Rachel Amber is no different.”

Nathan nodded fast, still hiding his hands in the sleeves. Jefferson understood his concerns though. He had been young once and falling for one of those whores. He remembered how he trusted his mother, how much faith he put in her words. The youth were allowed to make mistakes, but Nathan should know better.
“I just don’t know what to do anymore.” His student whispered, slowly giving up, ready to confess everything, ready for the punishment, the retribution.

“It’s fine, Nathan.” Mark’s voice softened a bit. “I do.” He smiled, getting ready for another transformation, yet another change.

***

The beach was already empty, with the sand that marked of hundreds of footsteps, tire tracks and the remains of a plastic wail. The fire was slowly dying in the burning barrels, still fighting the darkness, melting with the bursting sound of crashing waves. Chloe really wanted to be here for Kelly, to help, to support, to make a difference somehow, but she couldn’t remember why. It was so childish to blight some candles and read poems when somebody was crying in pain, suffering, longing, hoping for the best. Would that make a difference? Would that mean anything to anybody involved? Damn, she had promised Max to be here and failed again. Another broken promise didn’t seem important though when she was wandering through the piles of sand, empty paper cups and stumps of torches. A public celebration of a tragedy always left the site with a lot of trash and weird, empty stillness.

Chloe wanted to be alone, and this calm, dark beach was more than perfect. There was no place for her to go, to hide, to disappear. Home didn’t feel safe anymore, confronting her mother at the diner was a terrible idea, the dorms and the junkyard would remind her of Rachel. She didn’t want to be reminded. Not now. Not after what happened.

Her hands were shaking when she wiped out the blood from her lip. The wound was pretty deep and fresh, didn’t want to seal, and since she couldn’t stop brushing it over and over it was making it even more arduous to heal. Fuck, he hit her, he really hit her for the first time ever. Pushed and almost knocked down, Frank dragged her out, ready to kill, fueled with rage, fury and madness, obsessed with Rachel as much as she was. They both were so close to do something irreversible, something permanent and scary. Chloe almost pulled the trigger, even if the gun wasn’t loaded. She almost did it. Almost.

It was scary too.

Rachel was calling her over and over, sending text messages, worried beyond reason, but Chloe rejected every single attempt, hoping for her phone to die soon. She needed to calm down and prepare a lighthearted response, be ready for another confrontation, recall how to be nonchalant and hasty, play it cool. Play it normal.

‘Baby, where are you?’ Her phone blinked impatiently. ‘Did something happen?’ She scrolled through the messages very slowly. ‘For fuck’s sake, Chloe, answer the phone.’ Another one. ‘Please, baby, get back to me.’ Delete. ‘Baby?’ Delete again.

It was stupid to avoid the phone calls.

He had her bracelet. Frank had the damn fucking bracelet. Chloe wanted to believe so hard that he just stole it somehow, just like he had robbed Rachel of months of her life, but deep down she knew it wasn’t true. Her girl would go after him in a heartbeat if he was guilty of such thievery. When in California, her blond angel got so anxious when asked about this damn piece of jewelry, so uncomfortable and offish. Now Chloe knew why.
Seeing the blue ring around his wrist had opened up the old wounds, brought back the memories, fears, and tons of doubts. More riddles, more stupid secrets were still surrounding her tightly and Chloe felt so bilious thinking about how much Rachel still didn’t tell her, still hiding behind the tender smile and confident kiss. The whole Frank thing, what had happened between her girl and this fucking pig didn’t hurt that much anymore though. Chloe had almost forgotten and forgiven it a long time ago, moving forward, planning her future, having a reason to live. It was good, it was alright, everything was fine, but now it wasn’t. Again.

Fucking rollercoaster. Fucking blue bracelet themed amusement ride. Fucking Disneyworld of misery. Ups and downs. Every time she thought it was done, it got unfastened, unfixed again, erratic, broken and wrecked down.

Again.

Chloe closed her eyes. She just needed time. Just some time and everything would be fine. Just a moment long enough to wipe off the blood, the tears, to think of what to say, to herd her own wild thoughts in a steady flock, lock them down in the darkroom of her own mind. She had to think of what to do next.

It would be fine, right?

The gun was still chilling her back, tucked behind her belt. David would kill her for sure, demanding explanations and asking questions she couldn’t answer, not willing to tell him the horrendous truth. How could she possibly reveal why this fucking dipshit, the disgusting drug dealer was after her, why he had beaten her so badly and promised to do it again. Chloe wasn’t sure if she should put the gun back or steal the ammo instead, knowing that both ideas were hella dangerous. She touched the wooden grip for a moment. 24 hours ago, her life was so different, her hopes and plans so diverse and now everything had changes in a snap of a moment.

Just one small blue snap.

The sky was starless, thumping with black clouds, preparing for a violent storm. The weather report didn’t lie, despite her high hopes. It was about to rain the fuck out today.

The quiet breaks of the waves almost hushed the steps on the sand and, possessed by her own thoughts and touch of the cold steel, she didn’t notice Victoria coming her way. Chloe frowned. She didn’t expect her to be there, not after the vigil had ended, especially without a company of her little group, alone and forlorn. It was too late to walk off though, so the blue rebel just focused on the flames, watching the fire with her hands in the jacket’s pockets, shielding herself from the cold breeze and possible conversation.

Victoria walked to her and stood by her side, speechless and peculiarly quiet. She looked at Chloe, noticing the swollen lip, the blood on her cheeks, dark bruises around her face, the fresh cut on her eyebrow, the new wound glittering in fire, sparkling with the ache of defeat. The shirt was ripped and torn, the jacket cut by a knife and stained with red spots. The fashion snake bit her lip, suspecting what had happened. Her fingers grasped the old and dirty planner, pressing it closer to her chest. The nasty files she had fought hard to obtain. The secret somebody else had to pay the price for.

Chloe was close to spit a snarky comment, almost ready to welcome her in the usual, rebellious way, but the surprising reticence of her sworn enemy muffled her wit. The planner Victoria was holding looked oddly familiar though. She had seen it somewhere, but her memory just shrugged at her efforts, not giving any hints but leaving only an odd feeling that it was important. Useless piece of senses, always failing her when necessary.
They were standing there for a moment, arm by arm, listening to the cracks of fire dancing on embers, breathing the smell of burnt wood and the salty breeze of waves, alone with their own thoughts and throbbing ache, not urging any kind of confrontation, not keen on starting another fight. If somebody spotted them on this silent, dark beach, they probably looked like best friends, chilling by the only source of warmth and light, enjoying the last moments of silence before the upcoming storm.

After a moment broken in half by the failing waves, their eyes met and locked in a silent understanding, in connection beyond words and explanations. Chloe’s chest was still sore after the brawl and struggle, so taking a deep breath too was painful. It wasn’t easy for Victoria too, who, without a word of explanation handed her the planner and strolled away, with her head lower than ever before.

The blue pirate watched her vanishing in the dark, holding the unexpected gift in her cold, motionless fingers. It was surprisingly heavy, packed with lose pages, notes and receipts. She turned it in her hands and then her heart stopped, skipped a beat and started to race fast, so freaking wild. Feeling dizzy again, Chloe finally recognized the damn thing. It belonged to Frank. It was his fucking precious almanac he always carried with him everywhere, hiding it from everybody, stashing it like a big retarded squirrel. Connecting the dots was abnormally easy and she understood finally that it was the reason he got so angry about. It wasn’t about Rachel, it was about his dirty grimoire. How it got into Victoria’s possession was still a mystery though, and why did Frank assume she was the one to blame, but the fashion snake had her own ways to make other people’s lives complicated. She didn’t fail this time either.

Chloe opened it slowly, feeling that whatever was inside might be deadly, dangerous, unsafe. Just after the cover she discovered a pile of notes. Some of them were scribbled on a napkin, some on an old receipt, some were just ripped pages from different notebooks. Short letters, messages, so dear to him he collected them all even if written so carelessly.

She recognized the handwriting in a second.

*Frankie B,*

*I’m sorry for crying last night. I know how much you did for me. You killed for me, you took the blood oath, you took all the fucking risk not even knowing my name. I will never be able to repay you. Don’t worry about Chloe, she has no idea. It’s better that way.*

- RA –

It was the past. Her past. Their past. Nothing to worry about. Chloe had no idea indeed, being lied to so easily, so effortlessly. Damn fucking memories. Her throat clinched dangerously, riveting the next attempt of an inhale. She felt sick to her stomach, physically ill, aghast and dismayed. Her fingers brushed the paper, traced the lines of the creeks of written letters, following the path of the cheap ink, holding all of the notes tightly against the sharp wind.

She read another note.

*Frankie B.*

*Hope you read this first thing in the morning. Sorry about last night. I was being a monstrous bitch and took it out on you. And poor Pompidou. There’s a lot of weird shit going on in my life and sometimes I feel like I’m never going to get out of Arcadia Bay. Thank god for you. You’re one of the best things I have here and I smile when I think of us together. Let’s just drive out here forever.*
Love u always.

- RA -

Love. She had loved him. She had written him love letters. Rachel loved Frank. They wanted to run away together, leave this town, leave her behind, start something new. That was a different version of the story Chloe had been trying to forget about for months now. She got so scared, afraid to open another secret, hearing her whole body, every single fiber of her being screaming, begging her not to, to leave it alone, unopen, unspoken, undeclared.

Her fingers made their own decisions unfolding next note, scratched on a dirty napkin, stained with pizza sauce and marked with the dark drops of coffee.

**Frankie B,**

*It was great to wake up next to you. Hope you will like the breakfast, as much as you liked the dinner ;*). See you later today.

- RA -

Writings like this one awaited her every morning, if Rachel had to get up early and didn’t want to wake her up. Just a few words to make her day better, make her smile, make her miss her even more. Breakfast. Dinner. Chloe knew the dish very well. It wasn’t about food at all. She pressed her fist to her lips, not caring how much paint the gesture caused, opening the swollen cut again. Fuck, that hurt. That hurt so fucking much.

**Frankie B,**

*You freaked me the fuck out last night. Don’t you dare to talk to Chloe about us. She would go fucking crazy and do something stupid. I will be back after I talk to her. Don’t be jealous. Much.*

- xoxo RA –

Something stupid. Much. The scraps of sentences, letters, words that didn’t make any sense, weren’t written in a language she wanted to understand. Chloe wasn’t even jealous now. She was just numb, too fatigued to get tired. Rachel couldn’t. She couldn’t do it, but she did. It was just too fucking bizarre, too strange to be true, too cruel to exist. Her own angel, her whole world was keeping Chloe in the dark for months, lying in her arms just after leaving Frank, switching between them, playing them both, trading one kiss for another. It was explained though, Rachel explained, begged for forgiveness, she tried to make everything right. Nothing was right. Again.

Please world, make it stop.

Every single note, even if composed on the back of a receipt, an old slip, hurt like peeling the skin out of her fingers when she touched the old paper. Addicted to this misery, to the fucking game that was wrenching her more with every passing second, she opened another one, this time on a on a blue, thick paper, carefully folded in half.

**Frank,**

*You asked me for proof. That’s the only thing I can give you. It’s the bracelet that Sera gave me*
when I was just a little baby, before she bailed on me and forgot she had a daughter. I want you to have it. I hope you believe me now.

PS: Please, don’t do anything you would regret.

- xoxo RA –

So, here. He didn’t steal it, but just asked instead. Rachel gave up her only memory of her biological mother voluntarily. Chloe wanted to understand, wanted to make sense out of it, wanted to put everything in order but it was so hard to find a logical reason behind all the untruths. Rachel lied. She lied again. She lied when she was walking with her on the Santa Monica Pier, holding her hand. She lied promising her future, being her future.

Fuck.

Her phone rang again. Chloe didn’t have to check to know it was her. She opened another note, written on an official auto-repair slip, with a familiar letterhead. Even if Rachel didn’t bother to mark the note with a date, the blue mechanic knew exactly when it was written. It was late February, they had picked up her truck from the service. The shop didn’t even want to take the old wreck, complaining about registration and the lack of title and Rachel had to use all her charm and persistence to change their minds. It worked. The guys finally decided to look under the hood, since Chloe couldn’t figure out what the heck was wrong with the engine. The repair was damn pricey, almost three grand at the end and the final amount had almost given her a heart attack. Rachel just shrugged, called Frank, and it was paid quickly with no questions asked. Chloe had been always wondering why he even agreed on a loan. She was just a kid, jobless and without any perspective on making money, not that kind of cash anyway. Her girlfriend just smiled though and explained that she would take care of it. Damn fucking right, she did.

A gasp of air changed into a short, sharp sob.

Frank,

That was not cool what you did. And don’t blame the drugs. You actually scared me and I thought you’d never chill out. I’ve never seen you act that way and the next time will be the last. I’m a Leo and we don’t look back. I care about you, us, so maybe we need to break our routine.

- xoxo RA –

Scared her. He fucking scared her girl. Chloe hissed through clenched teeth. Did he hit her? Did he really get violent? Did he do something worse, something more severe? Rachel didn’t dwell on the bad moments between them but apparently it was way worse than she vaguely described. Chloe’s fingers were hooking on the edge of the paper, ripping it slowly. He had stolen her and couldn’t even fucking treat her right. How the fuck was it even possible? After all of this?

The last one, was just a small piece of paper, a piece ripped off from the page of a book. It had to be Rachel’s book though. Chloe would never suspect Frank to have any kind of literature at home or whatever he liked to call his fucking RV.

I love you.
Three words. Rachel had written a similar note at the side of her math textbook, smiling and winking, playing with her earring when she took the pen out of Chloe’s fingers. It felt so special, she felt special seeing this simple sign of affection. Now, nothing was special anymore.

That was it. She had read them all.

Her whole body was frozen in deadness, unresponsive, heavy and stiff. She was holding all the notes, now open and exposed, revealing all the secrets, all the answers in her hands. It should be satisfying to finally get to the bottom of it, but Chloe was left with nothing but dull emptiness. The wind was tangling her hair, bruising her with its cold kisses, trying to wake her up with another gasp of breeze, but she was immune, impervious and resistant, even to her own body begging her to breathe. Begging for another inhale.

Chloe forgot how to breathe.

It took her forever, to finally force her hands to move. Her fingers automatically folded the notes with patience and care, hiding them at the back of the planner. She opened the wrinkled calendar, still smelling like beer, weed and dust, reading slowly page by page. The fact that she just invaded Frank’s privacy didn’t even cross her mind. He didn’t deserve any privacy at this point. He had taken her girl, her future and hope and now he was doing it again with paper and ink, letters and numbers.

Frank hadn’t made many notes. The things that he focused on the most was grocery shopping, some deals here and there, business trips and the money people owed him. Chloe didn’t expect him to elaborate on any of his daily activities but what she was about to read was more than enough. It was too fucking much.

Everything today was too fucking much.

January 18th

Pancakes, Chills.

Rachel.

January 21th

Rottweiler, German Sheppard. Burger at Two Whales.

Rachel.

Chloe turned the page. When she was just a sixteen-year-old kid she liked to make notes like that, keeping her journal up to date, reminding herself of how often she had spent the whole day with Rachel. It was so nice to get back to those days seeing how dedicated her new girlfriend was, where they went and which movie they watched. Rachel’s name appeared almost every day along with some stupid doodles and quotes she said. Surprisingly, Frank shared similar habit.

February 7th

Rachel. My Rachel.
He loved her. Chloe now fully understood how smitten and charmed he was by her. How much he wanted her to be his and his only, to the point that he was even getting violent, heedless and unwary. She almost felt bad for him, but then yet another page got turned.

**February 19**

*Talk to Sera G. Rachel at 4pm.*

So, Frank was still friends with Rachel’s mother, banging her daughter in the meantime. Great. Fucking asshole. Did he tell Rachel about Sera? Was it part of the deal? Was it the reason why they were together for months? Her blond angel had never mentioned it but on the other hand she had never even stuttered about any of this. More questions appeared between the simple lines, but Chloe was so tired of digging, she felt locked in this mine of doubts. She had to stop, she had to. It was enough.

So many questions were asked so many times, dragging all the details to the point that Rachel was in tears, begging her to stop, pleading her to forget and Chloe did, making a huge effort to get over it to trust, to believe. Now the whole amnesty of faith elapsed with a whisper of pages being turned.

**February 23**

*Two ounces of W. Deal with Portland.*

*Rachel Amber for breakfast ;-)*

This winky face. Chloe could kill Frank just for this winky face. Fucking asshole. Fucking sick dickhead. Fucking thief. Fucking lies and notes, fucking words she couldn’t stop reading. Her body was hit by a sharp spasm, almost broke her in half.

**March 4**

*Trip to Tillamook.*

*Rachel after. Twice.*

Twice. Chloe bit her broken lip, not bothered by the sharp fangs of pain. It was almost surreal how those five letters could cause so much fucking pain. She tried to remember what she was doing on March 4th, but she couldn’t remember. Probably nothing. Probably just fucking useless stupid nothing. Twice.

**March 11**

*Rachel.*

Even on her fucking birthday. Even this one fucking day she hoped Rachel would be hers and hers only, they had panned something. Her girl’s name was scratched from the planner, which meant that the blond sinner changed their schedule, or it was just Frank’s wishful thinking. This remark didn’t help much though, and Chloe felt violated anyway. Her last birthday wasn’t the greatest day to remember but Rachel, barely sober at the time, tried to make it special somehow. Decent.

Chloe’s stomach squeezed in a tight, painful knot. She thought this brawl today was painful, but nothing had prepared her for this inner blow, this beat-up, this wrestle. *Rachel. Rachel. Rachel.* Her name appeared so often, sometimes almost every day. For almost three months. For eternity. Chloe wanted to call her girl all the names in the book, but she couldn’t recall any. The name, the name she
loved so much, was everything and it was enough.

Rachel.

Her hands were shaking that much, that the notepad almost fell on the ground when she tried to close it. She barely managed to hold it together, saving it from the gusty breeze and dark sand. It was just pure instinct though, there was nothing worth saving in this fucking planner.

And then the photos fell out. Polaroids, with faded colors and blurry details, each of them was a sharp stab, a shot of venom to her veins. She had to drop to her knees to collected them, clean each of them from the sticky and wet grains of soil. Rachel driving the RV and smiling, Rachel with Pompidou, Rachel in his arms, Rachel dancing on his bed. Rachel naked. Naked in in his bed. Rachel naked again. Again. Again. More. Again.

The printed smile was declining along with the colors, but the seductive, promising and tempting hazel spark was still visible. Chloe had felt this fire this morning, this afternoon, between kisses and impatient moves of her girl’s hips. A small whimper left her lips when she looked at the polaroids carefully, examining every single element, aspect and feature. She didn’t even know why it was so important, why she was torturing herself, but she just had to know, had to see everything. All the secrets of Rachel’s body were uncovered, revealed, presented and served, challenging to whoever was taking those photos to take advantage, to take her, to fuck her, fuck her hard. Intoxicating. Disgusting. Hot. Nauseating.

Pressing her own fist to her mouth, she managed to surpass the vomit. Her broken lip was burning with pure fire, but it was almost soothing, like a painful lullaby, an aching evidence that this was real, that this world hadn’t ended swallowed by the damn polaroid hell. She wanted to scream so much, to release the anger or whatever was she feeling right now but her body decided to keep everything inside, ripping her apart, tearing down, clawing and burning her alive. She was fucking drowning, sinking in the dark depth, kneeling safely away from the calm, cold waves. It was hard to breathe, hard to keep her eyes open. The world got so dizzy. So bizarre.

She wanted to believe that Rachel was stoned to death when the photos were taken, that it was just one time, one moment of weakness, but her hope was crushed before she put much effort into talking herself into this simple mental self-defense. The details and settings were different on each take. It was their play, their entertainment, something they were used to. She noticed Frank’s hand on Rachel’s thigh on one photo, his arm around her on another, directing her, uncovering, asking to pose, forcing to show more. He was there, he was there all the time. With her.

It was porn. It was pure, terrible, obnoxious fucking porn, as disgusting as the videos and photos he had on his laptop. Rachel. Frank. Her. Photos.

It was too much.

Chloe stood up slowly, with all the remarks of the abhorrent amusement in her hands, shaking severely. She didn’t even notice when she started crying, the tears were as surprising as the little notes, dates, hours, bleached smiles. Don’t look. Don’t look. Don’t. She couldn’t stop looking.

*Love you always, RA.* Chloe almost read it aloud.

Her phone rang again. Too drained to turn it off or even silence the fucking piece of technology she just ignored the cheerful sound, the melody that had always been making her heart grow and her lips bend in a smile. This time it sounded so grim, so uneven, so fucking dishonest. Rachel called again when Chloe was tossing photo after photo to the burning barrel. The flames took over, eating them, feeding on them slowly, crushing the papers, changing them to black, filling her lungs with the
terrible synthetic smell. Burning polaroids isn’t safe, kids. Always stay away from the source of the fire. Always stay away, don’t inhale. Chloe moved closer.

The notes followed, one by one, slowly thrown in. The flame danced in reflection of Chloe’s glittering eyes, changing the hue of the tears on her cheeks into creeks of red and orange liquid lava. She didn’t hesitate, throwing every piece nonchalantly, fast, just like random trash. It was damn garbage though, everything was fucking garbage.

The last one was the planner.

Chloe stayed there watching it scorching, burning to ashes. She didn’t care about another desperate call, another text message. The terrible treasure, Frank’s greatest secret, his most essential stash was dying in the debris in front of her, in a fire dedicated to a missing girl, a girl she completely forgot about. Selfish in her pain, Chloe didn’t care about anybody’s else tragedy. Another fucking beep, another message, one more call. She was so tempted to toss the phone into the barrel too, finish it, make it stop, but just made herself deaf somehow, turning off her senses, turning off all the feelings and thoughts.

The mobile rang yet again. Rachel was losing her mind, worrying.

Chloe already lost hers.
“Get up.”

“What…? What’s wrong?” Rachel opened her eyes, blinded by the sudden burst of sharp light. Her alarm clock didn’t lie, it was almost 5 am. Stiff from sleeping in her clothes and barely conscious, she sat on her bed, throwing the blanket away, not very keen on starting the day yet. It was still dark though; the sky wasn’t even preparing itself for the rays of sunrise. Her phone, almost dead and exhausted from last night’s panic, was still silent and not even touched by a single message.

Chloe, with her hands in her pockets, was pacing nervously around the room, hiding herself in the shadows of her own shoulders. Avoiding her sight, she turned her head away, more interested in the books on the shelf and the pile of dirty laundry. Rachel narrowed her eyes, close to start hell but then noticed how much Chloe’s legs were trembling, how wet and dirty her clothes were. Did she spend the whole night outside in the storm? Did she get any sleep? Something was wrong. Something had to happen.

She had never seen her blue rebel like that. Ever.

“Get up and get ready.” Chloe voice was distant and cold, painfully unpleasant with the lack of emotions. “Take your wallet with you.” She urged, getting back to wandering around her crammed dorm cage from the bookshelves to the desk, over and over, like a magic circle.

The need for an explanation had to wait, so Rachel got up and started to rush, changing quickly and checking if her IDs and credit cards were still in place. Almost done, she reached for her girlfriend’s hand, but the gesture went unnoticed or Chloe didn’t want to waste any second for a loving touch. Rare. No, not rare, it had never happened before. They were both addicted, both longing for each other, always striving for intimacy. This time no kiss, no morning tenderness was served, and the blue pirate was avoiding her look, stubborn in her averting.

Rachel frowned.

“Where are we going?” She asked even more concerned, with her voice still raspy and cracking, and rubbing her eyes from the leftovers of sleep. The whole anger, irritation, worrying herself sick last night, got replaced, exchanged for a cold grasp of fear.

“Just get ready.” Yet another command.

Strange.

They left the room quickly, not bothered to prepare for class, and rushed through the hallways and staircase, still empty and hollow. No student activities were planned at this abnormal hour, especially in the middle of the week when everybody was just asking for 5 minutes more in their slumbers, so no one noticed them or asked where they were going. Blackwell Academy couldn’t care less.

Chloe didn’t even look around, walking fast a few feet in front of Rachel, trusting her girl would follow and not even turn back once. Her steps, even if seemingly firm and steady, were breaking in short painful twitches showing how difficult it was for her to pace swiftly. The back of the leather jacket, so shiny and new yesterday, was cut in a few places, dirty from mud and sludge. The beanie got lost somewhere, uncovering the spiked mess of wet and tangled blue hair. The suspenders, always hanging around her waist nonchalantly, now dangled sadly, torn apart and broken in half. Rachel, still quiet, was following her watching closely, and the more she noticed, the bigger her
concern grew. She ran a few steps to walk by her side and seeing her girl’s hands trembling, how nervously the blue pirate played with her car keys, made the blond angel anxious and worried even more. Chloe had to go through hell and back last night but if so, why didn’t she say anything, didn’t call? Were they running away now? Were they in danger?

What was going on?

The parking lot welcomed them with a freezing embrace, waking them up straightaway. They jumped on the truck’s seats still speechless, sharing only the space and cold clouds of breaths. Chloe blasted some Sex Pistols song and drove off with a loud tires’ screech, leaving Blackwell behind and not worrying about the educational obligations. Today’s lectures were cancelled for both of them, it was more than obvious.

They passed the football field, the city center, the gas station, crossed the bridge, pulled off to the interstate. Rachel was watching her girl in silence, noticing the fresh cut on her eyebrow, broken fingernails, red marks on her fingers, lip broken and swollen. The blue pirate was trying to hide her bruises and brown spots of dried blood on her face, but it was impossible to cover them all with the long strikes of hair and her head low. Seeing her beautiful girl so damaged, so injured and hurt, made Rachel’s blood boil. She hated seeing her in pain, physical or emotional equally, but still was holding herself back from asking what had happened. It was bigger than just a few bruises or cuts on a rugged jacket.

Chloe sped up, passing the other cars in a clattered rush. The road was very curvy, waving between the steep, green hills, bringing them up and pushing down with every other turn. It was risky to go that fast, and even if her rebel was always reckless, this time her haste got almost crazy. When the dark outlines of trees started to blend into one green smudge changing into a common shape of hurry, Rachel almost snapped, scared for their life. The truck itself saved them in the last moment though, when the CD player choked, coughing on the same note and repeating over and over. Chloe slowed down, hit the radio fast, turning it off and sinking them in silence. Usually she would curse the hell out of this poor ancient player, probably even giving it a few kicks, but this time nothing was more important than the road ahead, even if driving without music was one the greatest possible tortures.

Rachel, still thirsty for a morning coffee along with some answers, lit up a smoke, offering her girl one, but her gesture got ignored. She shrugged lightly, watching her own reflection on the car’s side window, too stressed to enjoy the view. The blue rebel was obsessively focused on the road, forcing the old truck to feed on the icy asphalt, pushing the stertorous engine to its limits, hurtling and racing between the curbs of wooden rubble and piles of mountain snow. The cabin filled with the smell of tobacco, changed the stillness from reserved cold to distant weird. Just short breaths, silence, not a single look given. Rush. Rachel took a sharp drag of smoke, noticing they were going East, hiding deeper into the land, so no California then.

Where the hell was she taking her?

She would give everything for a touch of Chloe’s hand, for a wince or smile, a small sign of normality in this urging mess. The blue driver decided to ignore Rachel’s presence altogether, even if she was occupying the other side of the cabin crashing her cigarette to ashes with repetitive, short breaths. It was hard to sit there so calmly, to suffer the ride with supposed patience and seeing her girlfriend so changed, so different. Determined. Cold. Distant. Nervous. Angry.

Not hers.

Suddenly Chloe grasped the wheel harder, choked and hit the brakes with a warning squeak. The truck wheezed, slipping on the empty road, when its engine howled in distress. The car behind
almost hit them, danced between the curly corners of the highway and finally passed them by in the last minute. A long blast of horn pierced the air leaving them half-deaf, when the old pickup finally got stopped at the muddy wayside, alone between the green wasteland and the hollow highway. Rachel didn’t even move nor take her eyes off Chloe, hearing her own heart pounding wildly. Usually she would yell or hiss at her girl for such risky way to stop this insane ride, but now she just waited, still watching intently. The broken lip was bleeding again since Chloe bit it when turning the wheel, the eyebrow really needed stitches, or the cut would leave a nasty, long scar. Her blue treasure didn’t care about her wounds though, hiding herself deeper in the hunch of shoulders. It was about time to get hurt again and the scratches on her face were nothing comparing to the inner pain.

Panting heavily, Chloe opened her mouth, trying to say something, but her voice was kidnapped, betrayed her and vanished. She tried once again, but still nothing, no sound wanted to come out, not a single noise. It was so damn hard again to communicate, put some words together. Words. Chloe forgot all of them.

“What’s wrong?” Rachel asked as softly as her raspy voice would let her.

“What’s wrong?” Rachel repeated, feeling the cold fingers of fear scratching her throat. A few more seconds and she would lose her ability to speak or erupt in senseless fury. The fact that her voice was still calm and gentle was truly a wonder.

A blue Buick passed them not slowing down, almost scratching the rusty side of the truck. The road was very narrow, but the locals were used to dancing on this thin, foothill streak. Another loud horn left them shaken for a split second.

“Victoria. She…” Chloe started and rapidly got silent, looking at her fingernails broken and splintered, black from dirt and wet sand. To be able to start talking she had to break into her own thoughts, rob herself out from a comfort zone. It would be way easier to stay mute forever, leaving the horrors unspoken, semi-true and not real.

Rachel winced, hearing the infamous name. Victoria wasn’t a danger, not a serious threat, but somehow those two words made her even more uneasy.

“Victoria...” Repeating this name was almost a relief, like the first step in the right direction. Chloe sniffed lightly taking a deep breath. “She… found stuff about you and Frank... I don’t know how she got it, but she had your notes to him, his planner with your... Schedules, all that shit. The letters… You…” She closed her eyes trying to forget every single line on the paper, but all of them were carved deeply in her memory. It would be so fucking nice to be forgetful at least once. “You said... You wrote that you loved him, your plans together and… That you think...” Wrong tense. Damn it. “…Thought about you both leaving Arcadia and... and... that… That he…” She stuttered. “…He got violent and he hit you. He got violent more than once.”

Rachel felt dizzy. She felt sick. Suddenly the rigid panic melted into a warm, disgusting fever making her nauseous and weak. Chloe had seen all the stupid letters, written on the back of a receipt, on a
stained napkin, on a piece of paper ripped from a text book. Reckless sentences, some lies, some truths, some dreams or fears, Rachel wanted to forget about so badly. The smoke changed into a long pipe of ashes, so she gushed it down, not really aware of her own moves.

“I didn’t know he kept those notes…” The words came up, unwillingly leaving the lips, holding onto her tongue.

“He fucking did…” Chloe nodded fast, repeatedly, still not brave enough to send her a single look. Close to tears, she fought with her twitching lips, trying to finish what she had started. Talking. Fucking talking. “Along… with your…” She sobbed. “…Photos. I saw them. All of them.”

Rachel went pale.

“All of them?” She whispered, feeling her hands sweating, trembling so forcefully that she had to hide them in the long sleeves of her coat, trying to fade, to vanish. The shock pushed her deeper into the old seat, forcing to curl up inside.

Everything but the photos, please God, just not those fucking photos. Her girlfriend, her amazing trustful and vulnerable blue pirate saw the obnoxious, nude polaroids he had taken of her. The snaps of the past, the nastiest thing he had ever done, when she was posing for him naked, sometimes even way more than simply undressed, inviting, seducing and tempting. Yes, she had been drunk and stoned. Yes, everything had been fucked up between them then, but it didn’t matter. Her girl had seen them. She had fucking seen them. The photos Chloe would never dare to take of her, would never ask for, and this dirty, disgusting drug dealer had a decent collection. Photos that shouldn’t be taken, shouldn’t exist, but did, oh god, she had seen them all. Rachel sniffed sharply. Why now, why for fuck’s sake? Everything was going so well, they were good, planning, living, love, Chloe, her Chloe, and now, with a snap of dirty fingers, her whole world turned upside down, spun over like a thrown coin.

Photos. It wasn’t about the letters, even if they had to be painful for her girlfriend too. Words could hurt like hell, but pictures... It was like a bullet to the head. Rachel remembered the selfies she was sending Chloe, messing around, teasing and provoking. Damn right she did, sometimes even too often. She loved imagining the blush and the fact of knowing how much Chloe would get turned on by a simple image, especially with a suggestive message or description. Their little dirty play, nothing bad, nothing too much. Those photos weren’t even closely similar though, not equal by any means. What Frank did, was porn. What Rachel did for her was intimacy. Big difference.

A whole world of difference.

“Yeah.” Chloe’s fingers were grasping the wheel tightly, rubbing it raw. She tried to get a grip, to focus, but her mind was recalling image after image, recalling everything uncovered, exposed, served. She wasn’t the one they had been served to. “I saw them…” She gasped, so close to a sob again and shaking her head, trying to get rid of tears. Crying over porn seemed silly, even if her girlfriend was playing the main role, being a fucking superstar taking all the nasty fucking spotlight.

She would break up with her. Rachel closed her eyes, motionless, deadened and weirdly calm now, just like six months ago when she begged for another chance, when she had put everything on the line not expecting much. This time the hope was tiny, almost non-existent, pretty damn dead. Her girlfriend was too fragile, too sensitive and too damn injured by what she had seen to just walk pass it, call it done and move on.

Brace for impact, Amber. Pay the price. Embrace the fact that you had fucked up. You would be single in a few minutes, just a little bit more shit dragged out, maybe she would call you names and then leave you in the middle of nowhere driving off. Get used to this thought, inure. That was the last
time she would talk to you, last conversation ever. Listen to the voice you loved so much, to her breath, watch her misery. That was it, Amber. The end. They would end this soon.

Matter of fucking time, right?

It was just one dream, one stupid wish she had been living in for over half a year now. Chloe. Rachel just wanted to be hers, rebuild, reset, reboot, start anew. One fucking hopeful request. Nothing else mattered as much as to save what was so special and, damn, she had worked so hard to fix things between them, forget about the mistakes and move on. Now Rachel Amber found herself locked down in her own past. The faith, the fucking trust that everything would be alright, was slipping away, fading, vanishing in the great crater of hot, burning ashes. Yesterdays were eating her tomorrows in a fast and steady pace. The snake was swallowing its own tail. End of the circle. The end. Their end.

“I burned the whole thing down.” Chloe’s whisper was broken by a muffed sob.

Rachel wanted to hold her, hug her so badly but she started to play with the edge of her sleeve instead, ripping it apart, thread after thread, too scared to make any kind of move. Her fingernails were breaking over the stiff fabric, painfully bending and hooking over the flannel rim.

“I feel so fucking hopeless.” Her girl wept again. “I thought we got over it, that it’s done, but when I saw he still has your bracelet, when I read that you gave it to him…” The steering wheel got hit and squeezed so hard that the worn-out plastic almost bust in pieces. “I’m trying and trying and... Trying to leave it behind, but the things I’ve seen…” Chloe bit her hand trying to suppress the sob.

“Chloe...” Rachel’s lips moved surprising them both. Her girl just stopped her with one shaken gesture, still not ready to meet her gaze. The memory of her blond angel waking up today, so innocent and trustful was melting and mixing with everything Chloe had seen, with the image of Frank’s sultry drugged whore open for the foulest, most unbridled requests. The best and the worst, the saint and the sinner. The blue misery didn’t want those two sides to blend in. She couldn’t afford it to happen.

“You loved him! You said you loved him! Him! Frank!” She suddenly exploded, yelled so loud that Rachel budged in tremor, with her eyes wide open.

“I…” Words, speaking, opening her mouth was unintentional, instinctive but Chloe rose her hand again in a warning gesture, sinking them both in tense stillness again.

“Don’t. Just... Don’t.” It wasn’t a demand but a desperate plea. The blue misery had already made up her mind, managing to survive on scraps of hopes and self-explanation, excusing her own girlfriend and protecting her from her own thoughts and doubts. She had spent the whole night creating her own little justifications, sometimes silly and illogical but good enough to believe in. Nothing more was needed or expected, and Rachel had to just listen and sit in silence. That was all that Chloe wanted. She didn’t want to dive into this again, discuss Frank’s shit, dwell on every single fucking detail. Hearing more would break her in half and fuck, she was already broken.

A deep breath should help. It didn’t.

“Just when you see... when you actually see what was going on, not just imagine... when you can feel it, see it, touch it...” Chloe pronounced every single word so firmly, so vigilantly, adding so much power and desperation in every single sound. It was heartbreaking. “It’s just like being there, present, like I was there watching you two, you two doing...” She was pressing her forehead to the wheel, bending over the dashboard, with her blue hair dancing sadly around her face.
Jailed in misery and the smell of cheap air freshener they kept sitting in steamy numbness, heated by their own breaths. Rachel, supposedly calm and serene, ran her fingers through her hair, feeling how her faith was failing her, slipping out quickly. Something inside of her was dying, disappearing, replaced with a bit of anger, emptiness and pure, simple nothing. The world outside the dirty, cracked side window looked like a hallucination, a dreamy fairy tale, so ordinary and beautiful at the same time. The cars were passing them by, one by one, not slowing much on the steep curve, rocking the truck with their speed and impatience. Rachel looked at the horizon, bursting in the light of sunrise, painting Mount Hood and the crown of tall pines in the golden and red blaze. It was a damn beautiful morning, amazing beginning for a lot of people. New day, new hope.

Rachel’s chest got so heavy from the surpassed cry.

“I wanna get married.” Chloe’s whisper was so soft and gentle.

Her heart skipped a bit, forgot the rhythm entirely. She had to hear her wrong. Her chest tightened more, throat got so damn dry.

“Like... Today?” Rachel whispered almost unconsciously.

“Yeah. Today.” The blue pirate nodded sharply, trying not to weep again. “I was taking you to Portland. I mean... I wanted to be fucking direct and make the decision for the both of us, but... I think I’m not that kind of person, you know?” This time it was easier to breathe. Looking was still out of the question though. “Everybody was forcing you to do stuff and I want to be the one who doesn’t force shit.” And then Chloe got back to scratching her fingernails, freezing in silence again.


Rachel’s ears were ringing, her head pounding with a throbbing dull pulse. She felt cold, then hot, then cold again and then she shook her head, waking up from a freeze. It was her chance, maybe the only chance ever, to do the right thing. Chance. Hope. Madness.

“Alright.” Rachel nodded, and then added firmly. “Get out. Get out of the car. Now.”

“What?” Chloe looked at her for the first time today. Judging by how tired and red her eyes were, she hadn’t slept much last night or didn’t sleep at all. Rachel looked at her with such despair that it took the blue pirate’s breath away.

“Let me do one thing properly.” She said only. “Get out.”

At first Rachel thought she had pushed too much, it was too harsh and severe, but then the car door squeaked open and the driver’s seat got empty. The slow footsteps of the weary cowboy boots hit the wet road in an uneven pace when Chloe walked around the truck to the muddy wayside. Rachel breathed in, out, and jumped out rapidly, gasped on air, grateful for the cold mountain wind. It was so wrong to do it that way, so inappropriate, but she didn’t have much choice, if any at all. Her thoughts wandered to all the moments that would be more proper, more fitting, better, calmer, merrier. She had never planned it that way, but fuck planning.

Planning never worked.

“Chloe Price.” She looked at her girlfriend, standing a few feet away, shy, exhausted, unsure and barely conscious. This night cost her blue rebel a lot forcing to pay such a high price. Too high. Chloe always had to overpay for everything in life. She sucked at trading, it was time to change it.

“Rachel Amber.” She heard the response, spoken routinely. Her blue rebel was repeating the memory, letting her instinct to guide her. On the other hand, what else could she say?
Rachel took her hands in hers, caressing her fingers slowly, and bowed her head thinking how to start. The carefully crafted speech got forgotten, her eloquence and articulacy decided to take a long, extensive vacation and the words randomly changed their meanings. Right. Doing it right. Special. She swallowed hard and then, in the dirt of the road, Rachel dropped to one knee in front of Chloe, partly begging, partly asking and surprisingly scared to cross her gaze with hers. What would she see? Disgust? Shame? Abhorrence? Regret? Beggars couldn’t be choosers though, so fighting her own demons, Rachel finally was able to look into those blue eyes.

“Four years ago, I met a girl, and when I looked at her no speech was left in me.” She started very slowly, forcing her own lips to move. Her whisper was so weak that she wasn’t sure if Chloe was able to hear her. Rachel cleared her throat. “She made my heart beat again, never judged me, even when I lost my way, and helped me to find it back instead. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, I lied and cheated but she was always by my side, even if heartbroken, even if dealing with her own problems, not asking for anything in return. I wanted to give her everything, I still do. Not to repay for my terrible mistakes, not because of guilt, but she’s my second half, you know?” When did the tears appear? Rachel blinked and tried to smile. “My second half that I hurt so much but I can’t function without her. She saved me. She saves me every day. I look at her and I see home, family, even kids.”

She panted, trying to end this stream of words, the love letter never written, but it was too late to be stopped.

“Kids?” Chloe’s eyes grew bigger. It was a bit too much.

“Yes.” Rachel sniffled shyly. “This girl... This woman... You, Chloe... You are my whole world. I came from a fucked up family, I have a fucked up past, but I try to be a better person, you make me a better person. I love you, baby. I love you so much. You are my past, my present and future. I can’t imagine my future without you, and to be honest, I don’t want to. You are a miracle that happened to me and the most amazing person I’ve ever met. I don’t want to go through life without you. Please...” Begging was such a terrible idea right now, but it was all she had left.

“Please... I just want to be yours.” Grasping her hands tightly, Rachel breathed in and looked at her again finally recalling the formal query. “Chloe Elizabeth Price, would you do me the honor and marry me? Today?”

**What sayest thou to my most hopeful wish?**

Watching the horizon, bursting with Oregon green, glittering in the cold scraps of rain, Chloe was standing silently, overwhelmed and speechless. She had been planning this moment for weeks, months even, hoping for the best, forging all the right words. Now, seeing Rachel kneeling in the dirt, soiled with the dust and mud, with her head bowed, stripped out from all of her power, she felt cheated out of her own dreams. Chloe couldn’t force herself to look at her again, couldn’t stand the desperation in the hazel sight. The frantic but firm grip of her hands, shoulders trembling from cold and earthquake of tension, was making her dizzy and baffled at the same time. The answer was hella obvious though. It was more than clear.

“Yes.” Chloe answered. “Yeah, I will.” She nodded sharply close to break into a cry again, to a final melt down.

She heard Rachel gasping on air.

“I will.” She repeated and started to cry like a little kid, swallowing her own tears and smearing them all over her face with one hand she had freed. Her shoulders got weakened, shaken by the inner thunder as she slowly started to fall apart, falling down, but got caught half-way, in a safe landing in the arms of somebody who she really wanted to hate but fucking loved instead. It was surreal but feeling Rachel’s embrace, warmed up her touch again and brought Chloe back. She looked at her
girlfriend, fiancée actually, the head cheerleader, the overachiever, the amazing movie star so scared that it would remind her of the things she had seen. Nothing like that happened though, it was her Rachel, her Rach, not a vile stranger. Her own girl, her love, her little ray of light. She had never wanted anything and anybody else, but this one fucking lying piece of shit who just proposed to her in the middle of nowhere, despite all the plans and secret treasures. No one else, but her.

Her.

Chloe cried harder.

Rachel was holding her tightly in a desperate grip like there was no tomorrow. This whole kneeling thing during the proposals always seemed so theatrical and so unnecessary but now she was damn grateful they didn’t have to stand. She got her, she got her back, she could touch her, smell her, kiss her hair again. They survived, reunited. Jesus Christ. Again.

“I’m sorry.” Chloe whispered suddenly, feeling so guilty for ruining it, for forcing them to experience this in the most terrible circumstances, creating another uncomfortable memory instead of a beautiful one. She held her tighter, burying her face in her neck. “I should be the one who asks. You already did it, like twice.”

“You don’t have to ask for anything. Everything is yours.” Rachel was rocking her in her arms not loosening the hold. “I’m so sorry, baby, I’m so sorry you had to learn about this whole thing that way. I should have told you about everything… About the bracelet and the photos. I just didn’t want you to suffer, to go through it again. I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I’m yours, baby, only yours. Please forgive me, please…”

Then she noticed something in Chloe’s hand.

“What’s this?”

“An engagement ring?” Her little rebel wiped off her tears with the back of her pam, finally revealing the big secret, the magic fucking treasure she had been stashing for over a month now. “A little bit late, but I got it... and well… It was never the right time. I tried to do it in California, but…”

Perfect girls being too perfect.

“You wanted to do it in Cali?”

“Yeah... It’s just… Everything got out of hand…” The blue confusion gestured desperately and blushed under the tender touch on her cheek. “I just wanted it to be special and romantic and…”

“Oh, Chloe… Oh, my baby.” The memory of her girlfriend mumbling something about kneeling and her being clueless kicked Rachel in the stomach with a full force. She wanted to bring her back closer but got pushed lightly with a kind reminder that somebody really wanted to put a ring on her finger and wouldn’t accept any more delays. It took them a while to accomplish the task and it got done between first smiles, sniffs and some weak sobs. “Is it...?”

“Amber? Yeah and it was pricey, so it fits.” The wary smirk was slowly appearing on Chloe’s lips when she watched her girl totally amazed by this small piece of jewelry. It felt so good to see Rachel smiling. She liked it, right? It felt weird to ask. “I don’t have any wedding bands though. It was... a little bit rushed.” She confessed shyly.

Wedding bands would break Rachel apart, this one ring was close to doing so.

“Don’t worry, baby. Don’t worry about it.” She stroked the bruised cheek, careful not to touch the
most painful areas. Her thumb wiped away some lonely, last tear. “And now… Let’s get married, alright?”

Chloe tilted her head looking at her closely. Everything was happening so fast, Rachel was agreeing too easily. Getting married was a serious decision and even if she had never wanted anything else so badly, the blue rebel didn’t want to force a thing. She looked into the hazel eyes, searching, making sure.

“You really want this? Really?”

“Yeah, really.” Rachel didn’t even hesitate. Cupping her face with both hands she nodded laughing and crying at the same time. “Yeah, baby. Let’s do it. If you still want me, that’s it…”

Her lips were still twitching, her hands trembled. Jesus, this beautiful little creature was still doubting, still feeling unworthy. Rachel, you stubborn fucking monster. You clueless and useless, and perfect and crazy, and…

“Rachel…” The blue gaze melted down in a tender sight. “I’ve never stopped wanting you. I don’t want anybody else. Just you.” She pulled her girl closer again, closing her in her arms again. “Just you.”

***

It was 60 bucks, 5 extra for a waiver and immediate response.

The marble walls of Portland’s City Hall seemed unfriendly and the lady at the window was looking at them suspiciously when Chloe asked for the right form, with her face bruised and her clothes still in a dirty mess. She didn’t seem to be typical bride, happy to tie the knot with her fiancée, but the documents were passed with a courteous smile and all the help provided, especially when the room got lit up with Rachel Amber’s grin.

They both had to show their IDs, fill out one single paper. The blue confusion barely acknowledged it was the first official form they had to sign together. Name, last name, date of birth, city, state. It should be simple, but it wasn’t, and her hands were still shaking, even if this time for a completely different reason. It was happening, for real. Them together. Marriage. They were almost there.

Rachel got concerned a bit, noticing she had never bothered to update her driver’s license with the new address, not to mention it was confusing which one should she claim as her main one. In her most bizarre dreams she hadn’t expected to fill out any legal forms, especially those kinds of papers, anytime soon. She hoped it wouldn’t be a problem, she couldn’t handle another weird obstacle today.

Chloe was done, so it was her turn to go through the empty fields. She started quickly but slowed down at the end, hesitated, looked at her girl and wrote something fast. Passing it over, Rachel just smiled shyly not sure if she wanted her rebel to realize the biggest formal change in her life, their life that was about to come. It almost went unnoticed, since her impatient pirate checked the form rapidly, not paying that much attention to the well-known data. Then she held her breath and looked at Rachel, then at the paper, then at her again, baffled and in awe.

“You…” The speaking thing was extremely difficult today. How she had mastered the skill as a little kid, babbling about shit all the time, remained a mystery.
Rachel bit her lip and touched her arm, stroking the damaged leather gently.

“I wanted to do it since I was fifteen. Do you mind?”

“No.” Chloe whispered, passing the paper and dragging out her wallet, not taking her eyes away from her. The spark of blue eyes made Rachel’s heart beat a little faster. It was worth going through all this shit today just to see her stunned and surprised that way.

The ceremony was fast, under a grey cloudy sky, since they couldn’t pay for a venue and didn’t care about one. The witnesses were just random people who Rachel bravely asked at the street, unleashing all her powers of the legendary social butterfly. A bearded guy who was apparently a little bit high and an elderly adorable woman stood by their side, touched by the offer and having too much time on their hands. Chloe had never expected that strangers would accompany them in such an important moment, but they didn’t really have much choice. Oregon state required two witnesses present and no one really wanted to delay the procedure calling friends from Arcadia Bay.

The officiate, an older and very nice gentleman asked if they preferred the term partners or wives, and since the blue pirate was completely unresponsive, Rachel had to make a decision fast and on her own.

“Wives.” She stated and heard Chloe choking.

The vows were the next thing to manage but nothing was prepared, and Rachel was way to stressed to come up with something at the last moment. Simple ‘I do’s’ had to suffice and were more than enough. Chloe’s voice was shaking a bit, but she answered the question firmly, not stuttering much. Rachel almost cut the officiate off, rushing with her own reply, holding her girlfriend’s hands tightly, not letting her go.

Looking into the hazel eyes, Chloe bit her swollen lip making it bleed yet again, overwhelmed and astounded. The whole marriage thing was her idea, true, but it didn’t feel very real and reachable until now. Yesterday she had woken up to a horror and today, despite all odds, was slowly changing into a beautiful dream. Rachel Amber, the girl who she had admired for years and never felt worthy of her affection, was standing in front of her, declaring her love and dedication in public and officially. Listening to her vows, the blue nervousness remembered their first moments, first hopeful smiles, when they had ditched school and jumped on that stupid train, when they had kissed the first time, when they held hands in the dark street dreaming about running away. It was such a long time ago, almost in a different life. They had gone through so much not really believing they would survive for long, but here they were, in their simple jackets, warm hoodies, ripped pants, dirty shoes, holding hands under a cold bright Portland sky at the back of the main city hall, just by the parking lot.

And then they were married.

“You can kiss your wife.” Rachel heard suddenly, and she did. She did it for the first time today and first time ever, regarding the new status. The kiss was very careful, very loving and tender, not as passionate as usual and Chloe responded shyly, not noticing her lip was itching with pain.

Their wedding photos were just snaps on a cellphone, a courtesy of the officiate who offered to do so. Rachel was snuggling in Chloe’s arms on the first one, the next showed them looking at each other, the last one was a soft, peaceful kiss.
The whole thing didn’t take longer than two hours tops.

The documents got signed, they went back to the office, applied for the certificate and were told to wait. It was time for a smoke, for a cheap coffee from a convenience store and moment to absorb what just had changed, how they had changed, if even. Leaning over the wall and not sure what to do next, they played with the touch of their hands, recovering the paradise almost lost and getting used to the new brave path they just walked into. It was just a paper though, only something formal, no biggie, but this dreamy, vague smile didn’t want to leave Rachel’s lips since they had kissed. Getting back to Arcadia wasn’t even mentioned and Blackwell was entirely forgotten along with all the school meetings and duties. The world would catch up with them eventually and they both were so tired of rushing.

“Hey there.” Chloe murmured, trying to break the silly and unusual silence, sipping her overly sweet beverage and sharing the strawberry pop-tart with her girlfriend.

Not girlfriend anymore. Wife. Fuck. She got married.

“Hey back.” Her blond angel responded, not missing the perfect opportunity to snuggle into Chloe’s arms, feel her closer. Seeing a sharp, short wince made Rachel freeze, loosening the grip a little. Apparently the dark, aching bruises appeared not only on her girlfriend’s face. Wife’s face. Damn it.

Just before she was about to ask, feeling guilty to get back to the subject, Chloe’s phone started to buzz and jiggle impatiently in her back pocket. The blue rebel tried to ignore it, but Rachel rolled her eyes and urged her to pick up. It was probably someone from school trying to find them, maybe Max calling back to make plans for lunch. They probably should inform some people anyway, share some of this fresh, awkward happiness. Whoever was trying to reach them, would be the lucky winner of getting the news first.

Chloe hissed loudly, taking a deep breath.

Frank. Frank fucking Bowers had balls to call her after all he did. He was the first person to actually pick her number today, painfully reminding of why they had to make haste so much this morning. She almost forgot about this asshole, trying to erase his name and face from her memory at least for one day, but of course he had to ruin their first serene moment, their peace of mind. The call ended with a voice mail, but he tried again. Rachel noticed the name on the flashing display and frowned, more in anger than in surprise. Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and she was hella close to pull the mobile out of Chloe’s hands and pick it up, when the blue rebel turned the device off. That was it. No more reminders, no hardships, he could go fuck himself.

Rachel was watching her in silence. Guilty.

Frank. The biggest fucking terrible mistake in her life. The worst choice she had ever made. He should be very grateful that Rachel was miles away now, not being able to face him, confront in person. Her blue, brave treasure was still in pain, even if the bruises were slowly fading and changing colors from terrifying to just plainly sore. She had gone through so much, surviving the parade of misery, the damn cavalcade of torture. The notes, the schedules, the photos, and, on top of everything, the physical abuse. And fuck, Rachel caused that, she was the one to blame.

“He did it, right?” The question was way gentler than Chloe expected, but she just moved around, trying to avoid the answer, damn uncomfortable about her own defeat. Admitting it would make things even worse, force Rachel to take an action, encourage a revenge. Chloe knew perfectly well how furious her girl could become and the last thing she wanted today was to stop her from burning
Frank Bowers alive, even if that thought wasn’t that unpleasant. He did it, yes, he would go after her again, but she still tried to lie, wiggling under the watchful gaze, marked with the battle scars from top to bottom. It would be a damn time to play tough and rebellious, shrug carelessly and move on. Where was the pirate’s attitude when she needed one?

Not saying a thing, she expected Rachel to get angry or start yelling, but a tender kiss and soft touch to her back was the only answer.

“Does it still hurt?” And Chloe lied again shaking her head, still a little bit dizzy.

Rachel’s chest tightened again, this time with a sharp spasm of anger. This fucking pig, this damn asshole dared to touch her, dared to beat her girl up. He was stupid enough to raise a hand at Chloe, who had never done anything wrong, on the contrary. Rachel knew how jealous he was, how obsessed Frank could become, and had been always afraid that some violent confrontation might happen one day. It was a small town, he was constantly drunk lately, and Chloe was way too short-tempered. Although, even in her worst nightmares, Rachel had never assumed it would be so violent and harsh, so savage.

He would pay. Frank would pay back the full price with interest. She was done with stepping on eggshells in that matter, playing the decency card, trying to act civil. She was done, and he would be done as soon as they came back.

“Rachel…” Chloe was reading her mind again, brushing her hair from her forehead and trying to get her attention, concerned with the dark, heated gaze. “It’s ok. Really. It’s ok.”

Her girl just shook her head, lighting up another cigarette. The owner of the convenience store looked at them with a grudge. Smoking so close to the entrance was apparently forbidden but she couldn’t care less.

“It’s not.” She snapped. “He won’t hurt you again.”

Something in Rachel’s voice made Chloe shiver in a weird, conflicted way. It felt nice to be so fiercely protected and taken care of but a tad scary to think about what her amazing girl would do next. Saving Frank Bowers wasn’t certainly on her bucket list; they had enough on their plate. Something new had just started, something magical and special and it was way more important than a few scars and contusions that would decline in time.

“It’s not up to you.” She tangled her fingers in Rachel’s hair still surprisingly pleasant with the wild defense, hopefully not so rich with future consequences. It felt good to know that she hated him as well and would take her side, if asked or confronted. Technically it was obvious, and Chloe knew it before, but the need for assurance was her second name.

“Damn right it is.” Rachel scoffed and took her hand leading them to the park on the other side of the street. This annoying shopkeeper’s look was playing on her nerves.

Wednesday in the early afternoon didn’t attract many pedestrians, and the weather wasn’t merciful for avid walkers, so they found themselves almost alone in the green heart of the thumbing city. They walked slowly in silence, picking the paths randomly and sharing a short kiss or two from time to time. So much time was wasted today avoiding each other before so they both felt the need to make up for it, even if shyly. It was different though, whatever they said about marriage it was always different, so their moves were a little bit cautious and nervous just like the first time ever.

Chloe walked slowly, lumping a bit, letting herself to finally get tired. Still battling with her thoughts and misgivings she stopped the lazy marathon around the park and asked:
“Did you… did you really want it? I didn’t force it? You didn’t do it because of Frank?”

It was surprising how this noble and subtle creature could put up with the nonchalant and rebellious attitude on a daily basis. Rachel just smiled sadly feeding on the smoke and passed her the cigarette leaning over for a closer hug.

“I married you because I want to spend my life with you, not because of the terrible mistakes I made. The stuff you saw… It was…” She closed her eyes not really willing to elaborate.

Chloe dragged her closer. “I wanted to breakup with you.” She whispered holding tightly and kissing her ear.

“I can’t blame you. Did you really want it?” Her blue pirate nodded fast. “Can you… Can you…” Rachel’s voice broke in a shy whisper. So embarrassed and awkward she tried to ask for a kiss, for a proof of commitment, just like Chloe had been asking years ago under the lamppost.

“Oh…” Her girl smiled, touched her cheek, caressing slowly and kissed like the first time ever. First slow and comforting, then with fire burning, then hardly controlling herself. When they parted, Rachel’s eyes were sparkling, just like that night, three years ago. “Is that enough to convince you now?” Chloe laughed shortly. It felt good to laugh. “I really, really wanted it, you dumbass. Do you think I was carrying this ring with me for months for no reason?”

They sat embraced for a long while, ignoring the big city’s hustle, enjoying each other’s warmth and presence. Chloe finished smoking, and then frowned seeing Rachel turning on her phone and scrolling through some websites and Facebook posts. The device was almost dead, there was no chance for a recharge, so she had to be quick and effective. Researching got her so occupied that she almost missed another soft question:

“What are you checking?”

“It’s time for the wedding bands I guess.” The words almost melted with the sound of quick tapping. “At least for my wedding band. And I need a decent studio for it.”

“Studio?” Chloe’s eyebrow rose in an adorable surprise.

“I ain’t gonna settle for a piece of metal this time. It’s up to you, if you follow me, but I want it tattooed.” Rachel pointed at her ring finger. “Here.” She winked and got back to scrolling. Somebody called her, but she rejected the call, noticing a familiar name on the screen. Frank was really trying to die with a long and painful death. Rachel wouldn’t mind but was too busy with something way more cheerful.

“Please, you’re not gonna do it.” Chloe murmured, taking another sip of cold coffee, knowing how careful her girl was with any tattoo or piercing. A shotgun wedding was one thing, a mark on her skin was something entirely different. Tattoo on her finger, right, good joke.

“Is that a dare?” A wink and a shrug. Damn, she was serious. “Because I will do it anyway. I don’t want you to feel obligated to do the same. I…” Rachel bit her lip and looked at her phone, memorizing the address quickly and turning the damn thing off. No calls, no messages for as long as it was needed. “I’m not gonna ask you… or force you to do anything. I don’t want to be that kind of person... anymore. Not when it comes to this.”

Of course, it would be very nice if Chloe agreed and did the same thing. Asking for something like that felt out of place though, like stretching her luck, dancing on a thin line. She didn’t have to say more though. The blue rebel was addicted to permanent skin drawings as much as her girl.
“You are not forcing me, you just have the best ideas.” Rachel got kissed in the neck just before they got up and started walking to the selected location. “And it’s cheaper than gold.”

“You are not forcing me, you just have the best ideas.” Rachel got kissed in the neck just before they got up and started walking to the selected location. “And it’s cheaper than gold.”

“Nothing about it is cheap.”

It took maybe twenty minutes, cost a hundred bucks square. For both of them. Dare or not, the blue pirate wouldn’t leave her side even now. The guys at the tattoo studio weren’t even surprised, treating the request just like a common job. Somebody congratulated them, and a few people smiled, when Chloe finally stated that they just got married. Her voice was still shaken, as if she was afraid it was a dream somebody would wake her up from. It still sounded like a hippie crazy fairy tale anyway.

Rachel, familiar with the procedure, went through the catalogue, not really finding anything that caught her eye and ultimately setting up with a custom drawing. Fortunately, it was an easy request and was done on the fly. She knew exactly what she wanted, and the old, bald guy who was in charge of the order was listening carefully, changing her wishes to a doodle. The needle preparations, rub of an alcohol on the chosen spot, the familiar, metallic buzz. Done, before it even started. Rachel relaxed and didn’t feel much pain, even if the caffeine was still pumping in her veins. It was a simple tattoo, a band with some of the letters hidden between the blue petals saying ‘Chloe’s’. She kinda knew it would be bit cheesy, but she didn’t care.

Her girl went for a similar idea, but instead of blue, she decided to mark herself with red and fire. Matching opposite. Matching everything. “Rachel’s”. It felt so natural to label herself with this name, to finally show off her vow with a few simple letters. Tattoos had been always their own way to celebrate something special and helped to finally make the marriage real, way better than some official ceremony with a bunch of strangers and papers around. Rachel shook her head in disbelief remembering the time she had taken Chloe for granted, now finding herself so surprised and proud to see those few letters on her girlfriend’s, damn, wife’s skin.

Their eyes met above the focused artists both grateful and delighted. When the job was finally done, they kissed so hard and everybody around started to clap congratulating them once again.

That was their reception.

With the skin still burning they stopped for another coffee. Chloe decided to grab some pizza finally noticing that she was indeed hungry, and a strawberry pop-tart was barely a snack. Rachel still wasn’t able to swallow anything though, looking at her finger with a distrait smile. Marriage. She got what she wanted and always dreamed about, but at what cost, at what price. Some victories were bittersweet indeed. Before her mind wandered into a not so pleasant corner filled with dark thoughts, Chloe disturbed her gracefully, staining them both with tomato sauce.

And then, they got the license. A piece of paper didn’t look like a future, it didn’t look like anything to be precise. Just some forms, some names, some numbers. A stamp.

Names. Chloe looked at it intensively, not sure what she supposed to feel, how to react. It was there, printed, it wasn’t a joke, not just a doodle in her journal, a graffiti on the wall. Real. Formal. Official.

“You... you...” She stuttered. “You really changed your name for me.”

“I told you I will. One day. And the day came.” Somebody nipped her neck when she was still looking at the papers, overwhelmed and swept off her feet. “I’m not Rachel Amber anymore.”

Chloe blinked again.
“Rachel... Price?”

Guilty as charged and armed with the new last name, her girl winked, taking off the paper from her hands and stashing it carefully in her own pocket. It was way too important to risk losing it somewhere and even if she loved the blue pirate to death, there were certain aspects Chloe couldn’t be trusted with, storing official documents included.

“Yeah. Signed and confirmed. Rachel Price since now. Anyway... I think we need a cheap motel, with half dead neon lights and an ice machine that doesn’t work. I mean… if you want to…” It was a surprisingly shy request, even if the idea of naked festivities crossed their minds a few times already. Chloe smiled broadly, pulling Rachel closer with a swift, direct move. She missed the fire in the hazel eyes, she was done with tears and painful reminders, and was so damn ready to burn all the stress and doubts down. Her own private arsonist, now even more hers than a few hours before, gave up and melted under her touch, breathing faster. They both hoped to find a motel close and quickly, not even considering catching some well-deserved sleep.

“Rach… Of course, I want to.”

This time they were holding hands when driving. Finding a motel wasn’t hard, since Portland was well-prepared for tourists striving for Oregon’s beauty. They picked one by the highway, close to the suburbs, not interested in wonders of nature or the city’s nightlife. The guy at the desk looked at them with moderate interest when Chloe stormed in and asked for a room. Yeah, one bed, fuck off, you perv, no, you can’t watch. Rachel tried to help, dragging her golden credit card but her girlfriend, oh… her wife, just waved it away, ready to pay cash. She didn’t want James Amber to be involved in this on any level.

“One night?” The receptionist asked, grabbing their IDs and showing them their non-smoking amendment. Something was telling him those two should read it carefully or be prepared for a special fee.

“Make it two.” Rachel surprised Chloe one more time and the blue rebel just smiled knowing very well what was on her mind. They needed time, just the two of them, to sort things out. Fuck school, fuck Arcadia, nothing else mattered.

“Make it three.” She unwrapped the roll of dollars and put a few hundred on the counter. “And do not disturb.” Chloe added, hearing her girl giggling a little. The guy smirked too but held back from a wink, not sure if it would be acceptable. The girls didn’t care though, already in a loving embrace and pretty impatient to get to the room, so he just gave them the keys and got back to his ‘World of Warcraft’ session, ready for another quest.

“Enjoy your stay.” He murmured, damn certain they would for sure.

They walked to the room slowly, tensed with anticipation, prolonging this sweet moment of waiting. Passing the following rooms Rachel felt Chloe’s breath on her neck, heard her supposedly patient pace of steps. Number 233, 234, almost there, a few more feet. Waiting had never felt so good before.

When Rachel was about to open the room, she got pushed against the wall and kissed hard. No one cared about the broken lip, painful bruises, sore muscles or aching jaw. She responded so fast and so passionately that Chloe felt dizzy again, feeling her hair being pulled, arms scratched, and her girl’s leg wrapped around her hip pressing firmly. They barely managed to get inside.

Even if they started rough though, this was too sacred to continue that way. They left the anger outside, slamming the door furiously, transforming all the bad memories into one beautiful wish, a
celebration they would always remember and cherish. Rachel wanted to take her first, always possessive, always hungry, but this time Chloe didn’t let her win, even if an honorable surrender was part of their play so many times before. They fought in silence of ripped moans, breaths and irked moves, finally being able to reunite, to find themselves again. The splinters of seconds flashed between hungry kisses when they were taking off their jackets and shirts, the desperate grip of fingers on the bra clasps and the skin to skin contact finally, then the belts, the jingle of buckles, kicking the shoes away, unbuttoning, unzippering, pulling down, freeing themselves, and then the bed, the white, cheap sheets between the two of them still fighting. Rachel lost the struggle though. Her body bent when she gave up slowly sliding down her underwear, surrendering, asking to be taken. Her girl, damn, her wife, kissed her so hard that almost left her senseless, and then woke up every single nerve in her body with a sweet and direct touch.

There was no need for foreplay.

Rachel gasped, then whimpered loudly surprised by her own reaction, how much she missed her blue devil and feeling her inside broke her in half with a moan. Chloe’s lips followed her fingers, partly teasing, partly listening to all her wishes, selfless and possessive at the same time. She was teasing her unhurriedly, then roughly, then slowing down and bringing her back to speed, knowing her too well and still discovering new ways and new tracks to follow. Rachel wanted to come so badly, but she didn’t want it to end. And then it ended, damn, it was ending for a longer while. She saw all the stars, and none of them were dead, pulling the blue hair, dragging Chloe closer in the final spasm. The whole milky way sparkled in her girl’s eyes too, when the awaited kiss was served, still flavored like coffee, strawberry pop-tart, and her own taste.

“Chloe…” Rachel whispered, just to hear her name. She had loved saying her name from the very start, loved hearing it, repeating, humming, screaming loudly. It sounded like music, an amazing theme song of her adult life, now even more than ever.

“I’m here.” She heard, and everything was good, everything was fine again, when she got shielded, surrounded by her, comforted.

Addicted to the arms around her Rachel didn’t want to move, but after a minute fueled with fast panting, brushing off her hair and getting back her ability to see, it was Chloe’s turn to melt under the touch in the cheap, itchy sheets. It had to be special, she wanted to make it unique, but every time she was taking her was unique anyway. Rachel didn’t tease much, just enough to build up the tension, to make her more desperate in the good way, but her girl was already starving for her touch. The secret weapon, her blue earring was tickling Chloe’s breasts, then abdomen, hips and thighs, when Rachel went for the same journey but yet so different. Her girl was always shy at first and then the blue storm was slowly breaking out and taking over, when she couldn’t control herself just asking for more. It was a safe request, because more was a given.

Just before the final break, Rachel came back up for a long kiss, eating out the panting moan but not slowing down.

“Open your eyes for me. Please.” She whispered, not demanding, just asking calmly and Chloe did, even if it was so hard and required a lot of strength and will power. The stars in her eyes weren’t dead either and she came with her name on her lips.

Usually Rachel would just play with her touch, caress her skin and enjoy the little shivers her fingers would cause. This time she just hugged her, still shaken after, hugged so close with her whole body, covering her with everything she had, being as intimate as she could, protecting, rejoining, rocking slowly, until Chloe could breathe and speak normally.

Rachel didn’t realize how tight the embrace was.
“Holy shit.” Were the first words. The most beautiful memory came back to life once again.

She touched Chloe’s lips, still dry from fast breaths, still hot from gasping, tracing their shape now painfully disturbed, recalling the first moment when she smiled against them, when she tasted them marking with the first flame of passion.

“Right?” She smiled and sealed the moment with a tender kiss.

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“They disappeared. They don’t respond to my calls, they are nowhere to be seen, missed all their classes.” Max put down her phone and ran her fingers through her hair. “It’s not normal.”

Steph was watching her above her plate, growing in her concern. Her little freckle was worrying herself sick, trying to reach their friends and, as always, she had to take it to the extreme. Chloe and Rachel were called at least fifteen times and gifted with tons of desperate messages, most of them ending with several question marks. However, despite Max’s efforts, their friends just disappeared in the thin air not leaving a single note and not informing anybody about their whereabouts or future plans.

“Max, I love you.” She started slowly trying to be the rational one here. “I love you to death, but you have to calm down. Give them a day or two, maybe something came up.” It would be unusual for those two to just bail out and elope but not entirely impossible. Steph had known them for years and even if they played the good girls lately, doing something crazy and ditching school wasn’t that surprising. She was more shocked that they hadn’t done it before during this school year.

“No, I don’t believe it.” Max shook her head, leaning over the table. “They wouldn’t leave without telling me. Something had to happen.”

Steph frowned.

“Calm down, baby. I know you’re on the edge because of Kelly, but you can’t suspect the worst. They are adults, if you can believe that. Chloe would never let anybody to hurt Rachel and she knows how to take care of herself.” She pushed her plate into Max’s direction, suggesting her girl should finally eat something. Living off unanswered phone calls and anxiety was pretty damn unhealthy. It was a terrible diet and last time Max tried to stick to it she ended up sick.

“Chloe…” The little freckle ignored the food looking at her mobile, still deadly silent and incredibly useless. “Chloe doesn’t know shit about how to protect anything or anybody. I’m calling Joyce.” She decided suddenly.

Her girlfriend rolled her eyes, hardly hiding her irritation. Sharing their concerns with parents was the biggest possible wickedness and debauchery a high school student could do. Max was in very good terms with Chloe’s mom but there was absolutely no evidence that something terrible had happened. She could worry herself and make everybody crazy but calling Joyce was a step too far. Not to mention that her pirate childhood friend wouldn’t fill her parents in, merrily sharing plans about avoiding some chemistry classes and taking an illegal day off, along with her girlfriend. The Madsens probably knew less than Max though, if anything at all. Steph, who was always very reluctant to get into somebody’s business, couldn’t get used to the fact that her own girlfriend was so stubborn in that matter and wouldn’t take no for an answer.
“Can you wait till the end of the day at least?” She sighed, wiping her hands in a napkin and throwing it on her half-finished dish. Were they going into this crazy territory again? Another mission to save the world and people who didn’t want to be saved? “Just wait, maybe they will call you back.”

Max reached for her hand, squeezed it lightly, but shook her head again ignoring the suggestion. It started to be a new custom among them and it was damn annoying.

“Steph, I love you. I love you to death but please, let me do my job.” She heard her girlfriend sighing deeply when she was dialing the Madsens’ number. “Joyce? Hi, it’s Max. I just wanted to ask… Did you hear from Chloe today? I can’t reach her… No, no, it’s fine… I was just wondering…”

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Shadows on the ceiling got longer, letting them know that the day was slowly coming to an end and in a breath or two they would get drowned in total darkness. An ugly deer painting above the cheap, flat TV was lurking at them suspiciously, almost expecting the couple to move from the bed, but got completely ignored. It will disappear in the shadows of the evening soon, becoming yet another black spot on the wall and losing its ability to disturb them with its horrendous beauty. They watched the room becoming dimmer and even more cozy, not bothering to get up and turn the lights on, still awake and with their eyes wide open.

What a day it was.

Chloe held Rachel in her arms, stroking her shoulder gently and ignoring the motel non-smoking policy. The grey smoke was dying in a grey cloud up in the shadows and fascinated by the shapes and swirls she kept creating new ones with every other exhale. Strange, she should be so tired after the previous night and everything that had happened later, but her body decided to keep her awake, despite an omnipresent laziness taking over. Rachel, also exhausted, didn’t think about sleep either, laying on her chest in silence. A shower would be a nice idea, maybe even a dinner, although the only activity Chloe Price was able to perform was either fill her lungs with smoke or make her girl moan. She acted on the last one a few times already and planned to continue shortly. Luckily, there was no rush, they could rest a little.

They had all the time in the world now.

“How do you know why I call you sunshine?” Chloe said suddenly, still looking at the ceiling and releasing another grey dragon to a battle with the falling darkness.

The blond head on her chest didn’t move but she could feel Rachel smiling. Her fingers started to draw something between her breasts, discovering how soft and sweaty her skin was. She didn’t mind though, she could lay on the blue pirate forever.

“I suspect it’s your secret love for country music.” Rachel murmured. “You promised to tell me one day.”

“And the day came. My dad...” Another dragon joined the fight up high. “…My real dad loved this fucking southern tune. He was blasting it all the time in the car. My whole childhood was bursting with fucking happy banjoes.”

That caught Rachel’s interest, so she got up slightly and leaning her chin on Chloe’s chest looked at
her, intrigued. Her girl knew this wink, she had missed it the whole freaking day.

“Alright, bluegrass, I don’t see the connection.”

“Ah, sunshine is like common shit in country music and my dad…” The blue pirate kept smiling, even if a little bit embarrassed to uncover some family secrets. “He called my mom sunshine when he was really tender for her. Every time she got back from work annoyed by all those assholes and started a little bit of hell, he was just appearing there, hugging her and saying this one magic word. It always made her smile, even if she hated country music with a freaking passion. It was always like super special for them, like their secret. Something from my dad to her, like a gift. So, I thought…” She shrugged softly. “If it worked for them, it could work for us. Some secret Price charm, I guess…”

Rachel stayed silent for a while, thinking.

“I don’t have stories like that.” She whispered. It wasn’t a complaint, just stating a simple fact. Her parents had always acted proper but there was no tender moment between them, no loving gestures, no kisses shared, as if it was just yet another business venture. Rachel had never paid attention to it, assuming as every kid that all families were the same, but now hearing the confession she felt robbed from yet another experience. Had her father been tender to Sera? Did he lose his ability to be affectionate along the way surrounding himself with heartless assholes?

“It’s ok, we will create our own. We have a few already.” Chloe touched her chin and then laughed suddenly, falling on the pillow. “I can’t believe I married my high school sweetheart. My mom married her high school sweetheart.”

“Now I dig this sunshine stuff more.” Rachel lifted herself up a little to be able to look into her eyes and brush the blue hair from her forehead. “Chloe?”

“Yeah?”

“You think your dad... William... Would like me?”

A pirate’s smile, so wide and broad was the only answer she needed, but Chloe decided to elaborate anyway. She rarely talked about her father, forsaken the habit a long time ago mostly because of the pain it was causing. This time however, it would be rude not to give Rachel more insight. She pulled her closer once again, addicted to the sweet weight on top of her.

“I think, sunshine, he would adore you. And I believe he does.” It felt nice to lie on her chest and hear her voice resonating inside, listening to the slow, calm breath, broken by a snappy inhale. The most beautiful sound on earth. Rachel closed her eyes. “You remember when I told you about talking to him in my dreams. He told me that there will be fire in my life, fire that blinds with beauty, but that there will be a greater beauty yet to come.”

“Greater beauty, huh?” Rachel watched another spiral of smoke joining the grey feast by the ceiling. “Did you find it?”

“Fuck yeah, I did.” The blue eyes looked at her under the unruly net of messy hair. “Didn’t you just get married today?”

Her shoulders got emptied when Rachel rolled over to her side of the bed smiling like crazy. Her blue earring swirled in the rapid move and calmed down when she hit the pillows with her eyes sparkling with millions of stars.

“It’s probably the best day of my life.” She confessed, covering herself with the white sheet. It started to get colder and no one wanted to leave this bed to turn on the heater.
“Really?”

“Yeah. I almost lost my hopes that it would ever happen.” Seeing her girl chuckle, Rachel poked her arm lightly, too lazy to punish her properly with a kiss. “Oh, don’t you laugh, I told you I’m painfully romantic sometimes, deal with it. And today, when you told me about things you’ve seen, I was pretty sure you would just leave me on the side of the road or something.” She covered her face with her hands, still blaming herself for the horrors they had gone through. Forgiving herself was never easy, and Rachel was still struggling to forget the painful details of today’s talk. It was fading out, replaced and pushed away this amazing, wonderful feeling of being loved and loving in return, but she was getting back to it instinctively, not even aware how often.

“That thought occurred, yes.” Chloe stuffed her smoke in a jagged ash tray, releasing the last bit of grey smoke. Her new tattoo flashed in the debris of orange embers. “I would never do that though.”

Rachel lay silently, waiting for her to turn back, watching her shape in a soft, dim light. The bruises were still visible, still painting her girl dark. The jaw, eyebrow, lip, a few on her back, a big one on her shoulder. During all their crazy and passionate moments Rachel tried to be gentle and careful but, well, good luck with that. Now she was still wondering how much it hurt and if it ever would stop hurting. They were so goddamn close to being done with each other, to rip everything apart, close the chapter, lose it forever. Looking at Chloe’s back she bit her lip thinking about one unspoken question she had wanted to ask for almost six months now. It was easier to whisper it now, not forced to look into those blue eyes.

“How can you still love me?” She whispered. “After everything?”

The blue pirate frowned, turning back swiftly. Damn you with those doubts, Rachel. Would you ever stop? Seeing her so venerable and fragile, Chloe’s gaze softened, understanding her struggle. Her little sunshine could play tough but was still unsure, still scared. It was time to kick those fears in the ass and get rid of them for good.

“I was born to love you. I’ve always loved you and always will. This one stupid heart beats for you and you only.” Ok, it was cheesy to put her hand on her chest and let her feel the slow, steady pulse, but it made Rachel bite her lip. She wanted Chloe to be romantic though, so it was time to suffer the consequences. Deal with it, Amber. Well, not Amber. Damn, it’s complicated.

“It’s not stupid.” Her girl responded softly, and her voice trembled a little. “I don’t deserve it.”

It felt weirdly beautiful to cover her hand with hers, with their permanent wedding bands intertwined, fingers laced and sewed with the calm heartbeat.

“It’s not about deserving it or not.” Chloe kissed her forehead in a calm and peaceful manner. “You are who you are, and I love everything about it. Even with this Frank thing. I tried to stop loving you. I tried really fucking hard and I couldn’t. It’s destiny, some weird fate or I’m just a clingy asshole.”

“I’m clingier that you, I just hide it better.” Another big revelation was disclosed. Jesus, what a day. Rachel couldn’t stop herself from talking. She should save secrets for later, something to surprise her in a week, month, ten years from now.

Ten years. Life. Oh god.

“Oh, really?” Chloe’s fingers were dangerously playful, dancing on her hip. She wouldn’t mind talking but damn, this blond wonder was too beautiful to just lie down by her side.
“Oh yes, really. Didn’t you just get married today?” Rachel hummed, throwing out the blanket and kissing her slowly. It wouldn’t be slow for long, it was already spiced with fire and the supposed laziness was quickly forgotten. Chloe gladly gave in to her touch, thinking how many times Rachel preferred to hide her disbeliefs under a passionate caress instead of opening more and talking of her own worries instead. It was her way to deal with her issues and the blue rebel didn’t complain, knowing they would have to discuss a lot of things hella soon. Her blond angel could get away this time, and, oh dear lord, she was so good with this escape plan.

It was getting really cold in the room after all.

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The fact that he had ditched school today was new to her but coming up with an excuse to save her friend’s ass was a habit deeply rooted in her nature and behavior. It was good to know Nathan wasn’t around though and she wouldn’t have to confront him personally or even see his face around. Victoria Chase, in all her power and experience, had no idea what to do with her supposed, maybe ex, maybe possibly still friend. Everything got so fucking complicated lately.

Max sighed, confused and apparently suffering from a lot of anxiety. This chick should be on meds, like really. Oh great, Caulfield looked at her girlfriend asking for help and support and protection, forcing Gingrich to step forward. What was with those gay girls always supporting each other? Was it kinda like a club or something?

“Victoria, listen, I know it’s your job to be a bitch and stuff, but can you be a kind human being for once and give us some info?” Steph took over, enduring and reasonable as always. “One girl has been missing and we can’t reach our friends. It’s getting pretty serious.”

Ignoring Max was easy, but the Vortex club and Victoria herself needed Steph more than she needed them. Her skills as a stage manager and owner of the most awesome sound system at school were well-known and cherished. It was partly why Caulfield was left alone and not derided by Blackwell’s elite. Gingrich wouldn’t let anybody to bully her little girlfriend and the whole wild bunch at school valued her skills along with her protectiveness. Not like in a super friendly way or anything, but she earned their respect not even being called a dyke often.

Victoria looked around not sure if Blackwell already spotted her having the uncomfortable chit-chat with those two nerds. Either the inconvenient encounter was going unnoticed so far or her reputation got damaged to the point that no one cared anymore. It was confusing, along with other… things. She had to play this conversation right though. If Steph knew about the whole commotion with drug dealers and their stinky notes it could easily escalate to some widespread and far-reaching drama. The last thing she and Nathan needed. The last thing Price and Amber wanted too.

Funny how she was considering their well-being as well.

“I appreciate the fact that you both assume I know everything that’s going on in Blackwell, but I really have no idea where Amber and Price are. Really.” It was frightening to be so sincere. It was scary that they disappeared. Victoria found herself in a very dark place though. Fucking darkroom of drama, she could swear to God. “I haven’t seen them in class and in the dorms, maybe they bailed for a day or two. Not that I would know though. They are not my best buddies or anything, as you probably know.”

Steph was watching her for a long moment, either surprised by her honesty or not believing a single word. One way or another there was nothing else to say though. They all knew Victoria wouldn’t share anything more, even if she obtained any important info.

“Yeah, roger that.” Gingrich finally let her go, stepping aside and holding Max’s hand. “Ok, thanks, Victoria. Let me know if you learn anything.”

They expected Chase to run away as fast as her high heels would let her, but she surprisingly decided to delay her departure, risking being seen with their company. Remarkable change or bitch had just a very bad day.

“Sure, Steph. Good luck. You will need it.” The fashion snake finally remembered how to haughtily walk away, and her farewell shrug felt almost friendly or seemed so in the vague light of the falling day.
She didn’t even notice when they both fell asleep. Somewhere between one confession and another moan, too tired to keep up even if they were still thirsty and not keen on letting the day go. The exhaustion got its lazy victory though as they closed their eyelids just for a moment and then time sped up in a race of resting.

When Chloe woke up, the night was old and weary almost steeping up and giving up to dusk, finding the other side of the bed empty but still warm. She sat between sheets, still blinded by her sleep and, noticing Rachel standing by the window, sighed with relief. Her girl, naked and with a glass of water in her hand, was drowning in the city lights as much as in her thoughts. The blue pirate couldn’t blame her though, there was a lot of their minds lately. It was a lot to digest.

Feeling lonely already she got up and walked to Rachel, who welcomed her with a gentle smile, apparently more than content for not being the only one awake. Whatever was she was wondering about, it wasn’t unpleasant. Just a little bit of alone time, but still with the blue pirate within her reach. Chloe hugged her closer, listening to the song of the busy streets and cars passing by, rocking them slowly. No secret mind power was needed to know what Rachel wanted and how much she appreciated the warmth around her.

Technically they didn’t have to talk at all but the calm peace of a dark motel room and the living and breathing city behind the blinds of the window put Chloe in a weird, sentimental mood. She liked to get back to their beginnings, earliest kisses, basics of their subsistence together. How everything had started, how the air began to savor differently, and her own life didn’t seem like such a waste anymore. Before meeting Rachel, she knew only one taste of darkness, which crowded her empty room along with contemplations. Since then, so many more of them had been discovered. The woods at night, the junkyard shack drowning in the moonlight, the beach at two am, the pitch-black motel room just by the highway. Chloe Price wasn’t afraid of darkness anymore, she found it soothing and comforting especially if the hazel sparkle was lighting it up.

“Remember our first time?” The blue whisper cut the silence. She didn’t know why but recalling this memory seemed fitting. Especially when she touched Rachel’s new tattoo, defining its shape slowly, reading her name again. Bringing up the past was Chloe Price’s way of dealing and getting acquainted with the unknown, tame it somehow, make it more common.

“Which one?” Her girl winked. There were many to choose from. The first time in Chloe’s bed, the first time in the locker room, the shower, the summer camp, not to mention dozens of experiments. All of those special moments should blend into one big smudge, but Rachel collected all of them, labeled properly and put in the shelves of her memory, carefully stored. She would never admit it though, it was her little secret.

“The first, first one.” Chloe murmured and kissed her ear. “The one at the junkyard. It was soon after you got released from the hospital. We met at our secret place, just you and me. I kissed you and you slammed me against the wall.”

Her blond angel laughed, putting down the glass on the nightstand. How could she forget? The whole mess with her father and Sera had forced them to wait for so long. Fortunately, Chloe had been brave enough to make the first move, even if it needed tons of encouragement, like wall slamming for example.

“Yeah, you were pretty surprised.” She smirked, flustered a bit.
“I wasn’t, that’s not the point.” The blue confusion sniffed lightly, greedy to hold her again. Damn glass of water forced Rachel to get away for a second too long. “I was shy. I wasn’t sure if you knew what I wanted.”

It was almost a lie, they both had known at this point, not to mention that no hospital or injury would stop a young, fifteen-year-old teenager to send some very suggestive text messages to her new girlfriend. Their kisses were too passionate and their hands too impatient to keep them away from each other much longer. No one really thought about saving it for later, making it more magical and special. Obsessed with each other, they just jumped at the first possible opportunity and had never really stopped since then.

It was a new taste of darkness and light for both of them.

“I made it pretty obvious.” Rachel rolled her eyes and finally turned back to her. She loved Chloe shy, she loved her embarrassed, and recalling those moments was always making her sheepish, although her blush was covered by merciful shadows of the old, humid motel room.

Some car passed close by, lighting them up for a second with its high beams.

“Well, still shy.” Chloe added coyly, relived to be dressed by the shadow again. “And then you kissed me very, very slowly. It was super slow. I wanted to touch you then, but... I didn’t know how you would react. I remember this flannel you were wearing, the red flannel and this white shirt.”

Damn. Rachel narrowed her eyes in a pure disbelief. She remembered everything as if it had happened today, but she had never suspected her forgetful rebel to actually retain those particulars. Yet another surprise, another gentle shocker. She should get used to it by now though, she should be immune.

“You remember details like that?”

“Yeah. I remember everything actually. You looked at me and said, ‘If you want to…’” Chloe quoted the words exactly, suddenly possessed by the time travel power, getting back to that minute, to the rainy afternoon and the cold walls of the junkyard cabin.

“I’m ready.’” Rachel quoted back, tucking her hair behind her ear just like that day, but way less serenely. There was no reason to be nervous now, not in front of her, finally uncovered, open and naked.

The blue earring twirled.

The pirate was watching her, with her fingers stroking her jawline, neck, the curve of her shoulder. The past and the present were melting together in front of her eyes. This young girl she had adored and the woman she had been in love with for years now. The hazel fire was still burning, even if improved in its heat a lot and the view mesmerizing, still stunning.

“We started making out.” Recalling that bight day was so easy, especially in the middle of the dark space. “It wasn’t just fooling around, like we did a lot before. It was damn serious. I thought we would wait for like a bed or something, but it was too late. I just ripped your freaking flannel and pushed you against those panels and couldn’t stop. I thought that was what you wanted, that I should be more direct or something. I was so afraid I had gone too far, but...”

Her touch became a little bit apprehensive just like three years ago, her gaze even more uneasy. There had been so much panic in those blue eyes then, so much clueless suspense. Chloe was always afraid to make a mistake, she always thought about herself as one. She needed guidance, a strong
“I took your hand...” Rachel shook her head still dumbfounded and tangled her fingers with hers. “I showed you...”

“...What you wanted.” Chloe’s hand brushed some of those blond locks from her forehead. “You were so freaking turned on...”

Even if this first celebration of theirs was heavy with desire, they weren’t affected by it recalling them, on the contrary just enjoying the outcome, feeling each other close on a different level. It seemed so fitting to get back to those moments, those first days when everything was so new and fresh, not damaged by any questions or hardships. There were no letters, no photos, no drug dealers with sharp knives or rigid silence in the rusty truck. It was pure.

“Wet.” Rachel specified.

“Yeah, wet.” Chloe rolled her eyes, not used to that kind of specification. “I almost went crazy. I remember you were kinda joking and smiling and then everything changed. You changed. You just wanted me close, closer. I was touching you, pushing you, wanted to get...” Describing an intimate moment never came easy, so she just waved awkwardly.

Rachel was watching her for a long while, thinking of how much they had altered and yet how many things stayed the same. Two girls in love, in lust and in urge not knowing how much further they could go, how far to stretch their luck and passion.

The darkness left them with another passing car’s lights and embraced again looking at each other, still two kids in love, still freaking kids. Two teenagers that had gone through more shit that most adults, or so they were telling each other. Two young girls married and far away from home, hiding from all the hostility and evil. Would the marriage make them more responsible? More reasonable? Probably not, but who cared. They were getting used to the new taste of freedom, redefining it again, trying to find their way, a common way this time, and the future, even if sometimes dark and unpleasant, couldn’t be brighter. Nothing new though. Paradox was always their faithful friend anyway.

“Yeah…” Rachel kissed her hand. “No one ever touched me like that… before.” It was hard to say it, not to remind herself about the mistakes that had followed. The first, and the last, but not the only one. It was still hurtful, still there.

Chloe already forgot. Bruises, scratches, broken lip, the horrors after, the smell of burning paper. It didn’t matter as much as this one bright afternoon a long time ago. An afternoon they had saved and recreated against all odds. Again and again.

“I didn’t know that, and I didn’t really care. And when you came… I knew how to find you back, bring you back… I was holding you then, all mine.” Chloe was holding her again, embracing gently. There was no need for a burning hug. The dark got so gentle again, like a piece of silk, yet another taste.

“I was shaking.” Rachel confessed into her girl’s neck.

“I thought I did something wrong. I was so scared.”

The ugly deer painting glimpsed in the dying neon light.

“It was just a shock. I was imagining how it would be, but it was different, better, that it finally happened. I got into your pants just after though. I was scared too. I didn’t know how... I didn’t
know anything. And you were... just under my touch... Melting.” Rachel murmured, slowly caressing her wife’s bare shoulders. “You came for me.”

“Oh yeah, I did.” This time the blue pirate couldn’t help but smile. It was a very wild and bold grin. Her reaction three years ago was quite different though. It had been almost embarrassing to get so weakened and shaken in her arms then. Almost. Rachel had held her then as close as she was doing it now, still protecting, still shielding. Her own angel, even if a sinner, was still here.

They both remembered what had happened next.

“And you told me you love me. Crying.” Rachel whispered, being an inch from a kiss.

“And you said you love me back and wiped away my tears.” Chloe whispered back, and the kiss was served.

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“No, Max. She didn’t call me back. Either of them.” Joyce shook her head and crossed her arms on her chest. Chloe’s friend was always welcome in this house and she didn’t mind her visiting even so late at night, but the long shift at work made her weary and visibly tired, the dishes weren’t clean yet and the leftovers of a small dinner were still taking up space on the table. Joyce Madsen, along with her husband, didn’t really expect to see their daughter tonight, didn’t wait for Chloe and Rachel, and the only thing they had in mind was to finish all the chores and close their bedroom door behind them as soon as possible.

The little freckle winced and moved nervously. She knew it was a little bit rude to visit them so late, but she had to ask, she had to check if Chloe got back home somehow, sneaking in by her bedroom window. Her friend got so skilled in using the secret passage and learned finally how not to wake up the whole house getting back. Rachel mastered this skill way faster. No luck in this department though, the couple wasn’t seen or heard in this house for more than a day.

“Chloe got her paycheck yesterday, maybe they’re celebrating.” David adjusted his Blackwell security cap and leaned over the kitchen counter. It was adorable that Chloe’s friends were worrying about her, but shouldn’t they know her better? He decided not to get involved much more, tired himself and focusing on the next bottle of beer. His wife, now occupied by this ridiculous conversation, didn’t notice, thank God.

“Did you really have to give all the cash at once? You know she is not used to that kind of money.” Joyce scoffed and rolled her eyes, not really worried or upset. To be frank, she found Max’s call way more concerning than her daughter not picking up her phone. “Dear lord, I hope that Rachel stops her from spending it all at once.”

Chloe was rarely home lately, especially during the school week, and disappearing for a day or two wasn’t uncommon. Joyce Price had survived a decent number of short-term escapades that she wasn’t informed about and was used to the crazy ideas her daughter could come up with. Those surprises wouldn’t please any mother, but there was nothing in her power she could do to change it. The whole family was still holding their breaths over the blue teenager attending school again almost expecting to leave the institution at any moment with her middle finger raised and no regrets whatsoever. Rachel, even if not fully trusted, was suddenly a very good influence on their unruly kid though. Joyce really hoped the blond girl would stop her daughter from something really irresponsible or deadly dangerous.
They missed school again though. David and she both hoped that this kind of amusement had already been forgotten. Apparently those two had to unleash their inner devils at least once per month one way or another.

“What paycheck?” Max frowned, a little bit confused. Chloe’s parents didn’t look bothered at all. Thank god Steph decided to stay at the dorm letting her to visit them alone. Otherwise her girlfriend would give her a long, knowing look.

Why was she the only one stressed? Why was no one except Max Caulfield concerned and anxious?

“She got some extra money from the Dodge we’ve been working on.” Joyce put a hand on her shoulders and smiled weakly, looking forward for this day to end. “Max, wait till tomorrow. They are probably doing something…” She sighed again not sure how to express herself.

“…Stupid.” David shrugged and took another sip of beer.

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“Good morning.” Chloe heard opening her eyes and the hazel smile was the first thing she saw.

“Good morning.” She murmured, not even bothered by the fact that it was noon already. They both deserved all the sleep in the world, but the night was keeping them awake and busy. There were no places to go or things to do except being with each other though. Today was officially proclaimed their own holiday. Illegal PTO, so freaking needed.

The itchy sheets cracked when Rachel moved closer to offer a cute little brush to the pirate’s nose. It wasn’t the first time they had woken up together though. Finding each other between slumbers, usually with the accompaniment of an alarm clock’s buzz was pretty common. They had been living together for 6 months now, sharing the same bed, closet, and dorm room, but yet it was different. Not many mornings like that occurred though, while they were always urging each other to get up, disturbed by parents, obligations, meetings or some other stuff not important at all. This time they weren’t nervous about missing yet another day of school, stressing over the phones turned off and all the social enquiries that had been abandoned. All those potential worries disappeared in one sleepy kiss.

Chloe’s body tensed as the kiss got deeper, she heard a quiet moan, then somebody pulled her closer, she wanted to be closer herself. The whole laziness disappeared, replaced by a heated touch, no resisting planned. Rachel licked her ear and started kissing her neck. So that was how she wanted to play it?

It felt so good to be married.

They finished not rushing, almost at the same time and kept smiling against less heated kisses. The moment didn’t last long though and Chloe’s eyebrow rose when her girl stretched lightly and jumped off the bed trying to find anything decent to wear from the mess on the floor.

“I think we need to hunt some breakfast.” Rachel explained herself, responding to the questioning look. “I’m really starving.” It would be damn nice to actually eat something real, not each other. For once. At least once. Then they can repeat. Or try something else. Damn, she really didn’t want to leave this room, keep the momentum going.
Her girl was thinking for a moment, contemplating how much she could survive without food and just crawled into her through the blankets, still shamelessly naked, with her eyes narrowed.

“We just got one.” She hummed.

The red flannel was the easiest thing to find, and Rachel greeted the cold and itchy fabric touching her skin with a short wince. Her blue rebel didn’t make a single attempt to follow her, resting nonchalantly and watching with pure pleasure. As far as Chloe was concerned they could just order pizza and stay here the whole day, week, or however long they would be able to afford it.

“I need to feed you.” Rachel tangled the blue hair, carefully not getting too close to the surged sheets. One step too far and she would be jailed in those loving arms and dragged back. “You didn’t eat much yesterday and not much the day before. I don’t want you to faint or exhaust yourself. Not to mention that we have to take of some of your battle scars and I need to buy some stuff, really.” Underwear would be nice. Toothbrushes would be even nicer.

“Taking care of me already?” Chloe rolled onto her back, presenting all her glory, watching the world upside down with all its advantages. It didn’t go unnoticed, as Rachel had to muffle her whimper. Jesus Christ, she was so beautiful, so tempting.

Breakfast. Breakfast was important.

“I’ve never stopped.” She winked, still trying to find her clothes on the floor. Most of their things were extremely dirty or wet and all over the place. Finding even a single sock was an awfully difficult task and her pants were entirely covered by now thankfully dry mud. Rachel sighed. The only piece of clothing suitable for wearing again was her flannel. They really needed to do some shopping, at least she had to. “C’mon, it won’t take long, and you will take advantage of undressing me later...” Pulled strongly and dragged to the bed she laughed and poked her blue pirate’s chest. There was a delay planned in the undressing part. “Hey! Aren’t you hungry?”

Step too far indeed.

Chloe rolled her over, taking this one damn shirt off with one skilled move, bit her neck and then started kissing. She hissed a bit feeling the spike of pain on her back, still aching, but ignored it quickly, focusing on one conquer only. Playing with the newly uncovered treasures, the blue kitten purred with satisfaction, especially when the efforts met with a very warm welcome. They just did it, it should be enough for an hour or two, but it wasn’t.

Damn you, Chloe.

“Oh, fuck yes I am hungry.” Her ear got nipped. Rachel’s laugh changed from a chuckle to a long, playful moan. “Do you think we could delay the pancakes, omelets and coffee a little bit more?” It wasn’t even a question, they both knew no one would leave this room in the nearest future. To be honest, Rachel was pretty grateful for being saved from collecting the moisty rugs from the floor and putting them her on her back. She was about to cover herself with something way more pleasant.

That kind of bold move should be punished though. Her fingers tangled in the blue hair and then pulled off, lightly stopping Chloe a breath from a kiss. Her pirate just smiled with triumph, knowing that she won already. It would be wise to get up, grab a bite or freshly brewed coffee but the red flannel landed on the floor instead.

Wise. Who wanted to be wise?

“I think you got used to the bad habit of starting your day with a dessert.” Rachel teased, feeling her
leg being wrapped around her girl’s waist. Oh, that was how she wanted to play it. She bit her lip throwing her head back, thinking about an entirely different breakfast and discovering how starving she was. Again. It was damn hard to pretend her strong will got unharmed by this blue influence, especially when the sharp move of her own hips betrayed her yet again.

“I’m not the only one.” Chloe kept smiling in a very mischievous way. Rachel’s lips were partly open, inviting and asking to be stormed and crashed with her own. “Are you complaining?”

“Hell no.” She whispered, giving up and pulling the blue pirate closer for a well-deserved kiss. “Never.”

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“Mr. Amber? Hi, I’m Max Caulfield, Rachel’s friend… Yeah, we attend school together. She mentioned me? How nice. I just wanted to ask if you heard from her yesterday or the day before? No, everything is fine, we just...” She played with the edge of her notepad nervously, bending the pages and tearing the paper apart. The conversation was costing her a lot. “Oh, we just can’t find them, either her or Chloe, so I’ve been thinking... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you, it’s just… Ok, thank you, goodbye.”

The phone landed on her desk with a loud thump, as Max fell on her chair hiding her face in her hands. The idea to call James Amber was crazy and she was battling with it for hours now, trying to talk herself out of it. However, without any other possible solutions or leads it was the only option she had left. It’s been over 24 hours, more like 36 hours since anybody had seen Chloe and her blond girlfriend. Calling parents was a decent thing to do, but it felt like a betrayal.

Why did she always feel like a traitor?

Steph was watching her, leaning over the door frame. She tried everything in her power to stop this madness, presenting all the reasonable arguments, but nothing seemed to work. It was a common occurrence though. Max was so determined and persistent, so focused on her saving mission that nothing else mattered, even Steph. Even them. Even their peace of mind.

“How did it go?” She just asked simply.

“He doesn’t know anything.” Her girlfriend sniffed and then looked at her imploringly. “Steph, I’m really worried.”

Even if pretty annoyed and a little bit angry, this one look made her melt and her gaze softened. Steph walked to her, hugged, took her hand trying to show that everything would be alright, that there was nothing to worry about, and how scared she was, how nervous that Max would get unstable again even more. This time for good. She loved this little freckle, she loved her very much, but it was too much and too far. Sometimes it felt like her girlfriend was more attached to Chloe Price than her and it wasn’t a pleasant thought. They were just friends for crying out loud, not a married couple.

“I’m worried too, but you’re going too far. Rachel will rip you apart for calling her parents. You know how touchy she is about them.” She shook her head trying to talk some sense once more time. Rachel and Chloe would get their asses kicked when they showed up and Steph was the first in line to do so. Not because they nonchalantly decided to take some time off, but because of the hell she
had to put up with because of it.

It was getting worse and worse every hour.

“It was the right thing to do.” Max took her hand away. So vulnerable and sensitive a minute ago, she changed into this unwavering rescuer, a soldier on a quest again ready for action and not accepting any delays or queries.

“Was it really?” Steph murmured, feeling all her hopes crashed yet again.

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Shower was damn nice. Pizza for breakfast was even nicer, especially with a never-ending argument on whether pineapple was an acceptable ingredient or the tolerable amount of tomato sauce. No Portland bagels and eggs this time. They gave up and had to order some food, since getting up was becoming harder every time and the clothes didn’t get any dyer as Rachel was hoping. She was still pretty persistent of visiting some stores today and nothing in the world could make her change her mind. Moreover, she wanted to conquer the city alone, aware of how much Chloe needed to rest. Even if wild in the sheets, her blue treasure was still sore, so leftovers of pizza and some stupid home-flipping reality shows would do her better than store hopping. The pirate surrendered to her will after a long, heated argument, reluctantly agreeing and suspecting some shopping surprises planned. It was Rachel’s plan too, but her girl was still in pain, sore and covered with bruises, and even if they both kept forgetting about it during the passionate moments, she really deserved to spend time in bed. Alone. Not bothered. It was hard not to bother her.

“Be nice. Take a nap. I will be back in an hour or two.” Chloe heard when the doors closed behind her girl. Two hours, sure. It usually meant three or more. Rachel was up to spending money and it was a long and painful process, usually leaving them empty-handed anyway. The blond movie star loved browsing, checking and fitting, and her eyes sparkled every time she saw a changing room. Chloe, though she hated shopping with pure passion, liked them too, especially if it meant taking advantage of her not fully dressed girlfriend. This time however, she was hella grateful for not being invited.

Who needed a changing room if the motel bed was still here?

The blue rebel stretched, smoked one and turned on the TV, switching between the channels not really up for visual entertainment. It wasn’t even ten minutes and she missed her already, what a cruel damn world. She got nervous a bit, wondering if Frank or anybody else could approach Rachel during her shopping quest. Her dead, white iPhone was left in the room, so she wouldn’t be able to even call Chloe if something would happen. On the other hand, they were in Portland and no one knew about their whereabouts anyway.

That thought was disturbing too.

Chloe looked at her own mobile, also silent and dark, pondering if she should turn it on and call somebody, let her mom know what was going on at least. Max would probably flip the fuck out too, but the blue pirate hoped she was keeping herself busy with Kelly’s case. When her freckled friend got obsessed, the whole world could go to hell and she wouldn’t notice. Plus, Chloe really felt weird about texting Max about what had happened. It felt like a betrayal, another broken promise. Her first mate would give her so much shit for getting married in secret that even imagining those witty
comments was making her ears itch. Blackwell would be next on the list to call, but what would she say? A shotgun wedding wasn’t an excuse, not to mention that Chloe wouldn’t like to miss the opportunity to throw the news at Wells’ face in person. This mean asshole would choke on his own booze and she wanted the seat in the first row to see this spectacle.

Married, Jesus, she got married. Chloe looked at her finger marked with the red drawing. It didn’t feel real, despite all the vows, papers. Nothing much changed, even if she really expected her world to turn upside down and Rachel getting back to her old, reckless self. Strangely, except the extended physical exercises they performed all the time, treating themselves with being entirely free and alone, everything else stayed the same. Was it normal though? What was she expecting? Chloe was never a big supporter of a marriage institution especially after her own mother wedded the Blackwell fascist, never dreamed about a white dress and a big party, not imagining it to happen at all. It seemed important, like one of those adult things she tried to avoid for most of her life, one of the big steps everybody talked about, but she was a simple girl with simple blond dreams.

Rachel was really taking her time shopping.

She took a nap, then another. All the TV shows were extremely stupid, the phone was dead, there was nothing to keep her occupied. Her back was killing her though, especially the lower part. Thank god for the jacket, so damn thick and warm. If she hadn’t been wrapped in this piece of leather, her bruises would be the size of Africa. Damn soreness.

There was only one solution though, one last resort on how to murder some time. Wondering about possible outcomes and what-ifs over cold slices of pizza were one of Chloe Price’s favorite activities anyway. She sat down on the bed and grabbed whatever was left, still surprisingly hungry. If they had just run away years ago as planned, would they also spend their days and nights at some forgotten motels, living off fast food and enjoying every moment as naked as possible? Maybe. Probably. Eventually. Not. They would get caught faster than Rachel could say ‘Chloe, take off my pants please’ and probably be forbidden to see each other for months or even years. The dream became real though, even if this escape was hella temporary and they would have to come back home.

Home. Arcadia Bay. Frank. Frank Bowers. She really didn’t want to think about this dickhead, although he kept coming back, constantly knocking to the door of her mind, crushing the walls of emotional self-defense, threatening her with his existence almost every hour. The only way to forget about him was to drown in the hazel eyes, take and be taken. Chloe knew it was yet another temporary escape and didn’t know what to do with this Frank issue. The famous fountain of Price’s wisdom was failing her entirely. Fuck, he would come back, he would come after her. It was scary to even turn on the phone and listen to a voice mail or read the messages. She hoped he hadn’t called Rachel as well, but it probably happened. Everything was possible now.

Chloe almost got a heart attack hearing the door cracked open.

“Hi back.” Rachel threw the bags by the bed and took her coat off, glad to enter some warm, cozy space. Chloe looked at the watch, it really took her only two hours. What a change. It was late afternoon though, perhaps they closed all the stores already and that made her girl to rush back. The fact that it was probably caused by her own blue existence didn’t really cross Chloe’s mind.

“Did you buy the whole store?” She asked, lurking into the bags. Five t-shirts? She needed one, sure, but five? Very nice ones though, Chloe loved the selection, but it was really unnecessary, considering their naked plans for the rest of the stay. It was hard to whine about shopping though since Rachel sat on the bed, pulled her closer and kissed impatiently. “Did you miss me already?” It was the last thing the blue pirate could say before being taken over by the hazel storm.
“I couldn’t resist.” Kiss. “Very much.” And another. “I always miss you.” Oh damn, somebody was really longing for her here. That was why she wanted her to take a nap? Clever. It was quite surprising how much Rachel wanted to get back to the naked part, not pretending she was hard to get. Was is the new thing about marriage or was she still turned on? “I have to take care of you.” Her angel mumbled, getting rid of her jacket and kicking down her shoes, not really shying over her intentions.

Thankfully, Chloe was still naked.

The surprise in the blue eyes was worth the hassle, but Rachel had something special prepared. Something she couldn’t wait to introduce and present. A few things actually, that she paid with her brand new golden credit card in the name of James Amber. It was silly to annoy her own father with bank transfers, but she was still holding a grudge against him after the whole commotion in California. He had acted like an asshole, now they were square. Her amazing wife almost got a heart attack, now he could get one, no problem, just check your account statement, dad.

Fuck her father. Well, not literally. Fucking Chloe on the other hand…

The blue pirate was contemplating how so damn good she looked in her new pants. She would look better without them. Yep, Chloe was damn right, this piece of clothing was just an obstacle and was covering this marvelous, sexy lace. Red lace. What a day to be alive. It was time to check if the top matched the bottom. Oh damn, it did.

Chloe grinned. Her girl winked.

The kissing got more impatient and proudly presented lace became an obstacle faster than Rachel had expected. When the first wedding gift got carefully taken off and the blue pirate was about to storm into a new adventure, she stopped her in half-move and smiled impishly.

“I have a surprise.” She murmured, hoping that the second surprise would also be greeted with the same fervor.

“Another one?” Chloe frowned, pretty sure that she had already unpacked her present. “What kind of surprise?” She really hoped it was nothing that required getting up and dressing up again, even if it would include ripping it off later. Clothes were completely unnecessary, she had no idea why people invented this shit. The amount of shopping bags was concerning though. What else did Rachel hide in there?

“A toy.” A lonely finger was circling around her breasts, drawing seductive question marks. “I mean, if you want to…”

Chloe tried to roll her eyes but was too busy going wild again. Of course, Rachel had to buy it, she should have expected something like it. The idea was growing on her faster than expected, although it was a bit scary. They both were used to experiments and she couldn’t blame her girl for such an idea, but something was telling her it would bring back some memories, wake up some thoughts she didn’t want to deliberate about. Enslaved to her own desire, Chloe ignored her fears altogether, drowning in another kiss. Whatever the hell, no chance she would refuse.

“Is that even a question?” She whispered looking straight in her eyes and, as always, it made Rachel insane. Oh yes, it worked. Ah, the hazel fire. Somebody was about to unleash her inner beast again. About time. Who was the brave pirate now?

“Yeah.” The kisses tasted like coffee and cold cigarettes smoked in the middle of a Portland shopping center. “I wanted something special.”
There was always something special with Rachel and putting it on that turned on Chloe beyond reason. This beautiful, fragile girl was changing instantly into her own, wild private lion who would dominate her within seconds and, judging by the fire in her eyes, she was planning to do it extensively.

“Just be gentle.” Chloe whispered, suddenly feeling the tip of the strap-on against her thigh when Rachel came closer, preparing them both and kissed her hard, just to make it less embarrassing. She always hated the awkward beginning, even if trying to make it as sexy and seductive as possible. Too much technicalities instead of pure passion. Lust can be dangerous though, and Rachel had a tendency to lose herself completely, especially in that kind of play.

“It’s not like we’ve never done it before.” The blond beast smirked, too turned on to actually pretend to be calm. Yeah, they had done it, quite few times actually, but it was never their favorite activity since it had to be planned and prepared, and they were both too spontaneous. All the toys were more experiments than common things and they were perfectly fine without them.

It was special though.

“We did, but not like that.” Chloe whimpered when Rachel knelt in front of her and slid in and then slowly covered her by herself, filling with the first thrust, kissing her breasts, shoulders, neck. It wasn’t even about her injuries, it was about this inner stupid feeling that something could go wrong.

“Not like that.” Rachel agreed, barely being able to speak. Trying to be tender, she kissed her forehead, nose and lips tenderly, still going slow and careful. She didn’t want to serve too much, especially after being warned. It wasn’t that easy, seeing her pirate’s body bending on and surrendering to everything. Drowning in the steady pace, she buried herself in Chloe’s neck, pulling the blue hair for easier access. She missed taking her like that. She missed it so much.

Chloe tried to smile between fast breaths, with greedy hands on her girl’s back, showing it was good, it was exactly what she wanted. Rachel returned the smile. She was listening to her needs way more than any times prior. She wanted to listen, she wanted to make it good.

The strokes become harder, firmer, more possessive. Rachel was choking on her breath looking at her girl, listening to her moans, louder and more audacious than ever before. She thought about Elliott, always had to get back to this asshole, tried to brush off this thought, but she couldn’t get this thing out of her head, especially with her girl reacting so eagerly. Rachel wasn’t the only one extremely jealous here, even if the blond sinner had no right to be. It was deeply in the past, nothing important, they just got married for fuck’s sake.

The strokes were still gentle, but she was a few moments away from becoming harsher.

“Chloe...” She whispered, warning her and asking at the same time. Her girl didn’t listen though, too occupied by the rhythm and her own pleasure. She didn’t even notice the long scratch to her thighs, her hips being gripped.

Something seemed off though.

“You are trembling.” Rachel touched her cheek, not sure if the whole thing was the best idea, but it was too late for them to stop. It wasn’t unusual for the blue mess to close her eyes or to hold on desperately, to hear her panting sharply though clenched teeth, but there was more to it. Rachel really wanted to finish what she had started, to take her, but if she decided or demanded to break it off...

“You’re inside of me.” Chloe responded, swallowing hard with her eyes still closed. “Of course, I fucking tremble.” She brushed off her hair from her sweaty forehead, covering her face with her arm.
Trying to hide her stupid, annoying thoughts she just pushed for more, turned her mind off, begging to stop being as vulnerable as she had just become.

Rachel had to break it, something was wrong.

“It’s ok. I won’t hurt you.” She said noticing her girl, her amazing blue pirate was scared and not because of the act. This intimate moment woke up some fears, made her even more sensitive, even more exposed. “You’re safe.”

Chloe dragged her closer encouraging, needing her to continue.

“You will…” Thrust. “One day you will...” Another one. “Oh, don’t stop.” The blue hair covered the pillow in one rapid fall.

“No, I won’t. I won’t, baby.” Rachel shook her head, not stopping, speeding up even. The flash of memory of the previous day hit her hard, almost left her stunned. Was it about yesterday? Was she still doubting? This thought made Rachel to go even firmer. Chloe was hers, she wouldn’t let her go. Never. Over her dead. Fucking. Body. Oh. God.

“Rachel… I love you.” Chloe whimpered, and that made her heart compete in a race of the century. She rarely talked during sex, usually too focused, too absorbed and way too shy. Nothing was ordinary about this time.

“Say it. Again.”

“Rachel…”

“Not that. Part.”

Chloe was almost there, so desperate to finish, pushing her nearer, deeper, closer. She was getting so loud that the whole motel was wildly informed of what was going on. They couldn’t care less who was listening, feeling free and unleashed, without neighbors, students or parents. They didn’t care. Chloe didn’t care, and it was making Rachel go fucking crazy. It was different, it wasn’t just a tryout, a fight over who would be in control, who would take over, it was them becoming one.

“I love you... I love you so much.” Chloe was able to gasp not slowing down, and then she threw her head back, yielding completely.

Somehow, a love confession in this moment, when they both were tangled in sweat and speed, tasted differently, more personal and raw. It shortened the distance, put them closer, switched from dirty and nasty to unique and breathtaking.

“Mine.” Rachel gasped, feeling her girl’s body tensing in a spasm.

As it was a command, Chloe came with a long scream, scratching her lover’s back with all her strength and force. If she didn’t keep her nails short, the marks would leave some profound scars. Rachel got pulled closer with one rapid move, in a painful hair grasp, but she didn’t mind. On the contrary. It was long, almost painful and so damn hard. Chloe’s eyes stayed tightly shut for a lingering moment and her eyelids were trembling almost as much as her fingers.

“Rach… Rachel… sunshine.” She whispered finally losing her grasp of the blond hair, still refusing to see, to watch, to get back to the world around. Her hand was taken away and kissed tenderly with love.

“I’m here, I will always be here.” Rachel answered slowly pulling out, but when she heard the light
moan, as quiet as a gasp of air and noticed Chloe just bit her lip in a painful pleasure, she hesitated. Aroused as hell, she looked at her not sure what to do, but those blue eyes finally opened, summoning her back, challenging and seductively inviting. Rare. No, not rare, it had never happened before.

Rachel thrusted again starting another round.

Chloe brought her closer, wrapping one leg around her waist, bucking her hips forward and closing her eyes again. Her head lifted back, her blue hair covered the white pillow once again, what a view. She could hear how fast her rebel was breathing, panting, moaning, so close to a wild cry. Chloe was never that loud, always a little bit reluctant, but now all her limits were broken, she was breaking them over and over with every stroke, every thrust. Her girl wanted more, wanted it stormier and tougher and was demanding it with her whole body.

The bold pirate was never that bold.

Rachel almost lost her vision close to coming herself while watching her, being a part of this act, being the one who caused it. She barely noticed she was moaning almost as loud as her girl. Oh fuck, she was born to do this, to take her like that, that was what she had always wanted, to uncover her, to open up the courage. Chloe bit her lip so hard that she almost cut her own skin, and another tense twitch made her mouth half open. Rachel would give everything for a kiss, but this sight was too precious, so she just licked her neck, biting hard. That woke up one more series of load moans.

“That was… hella intense.” Came the demand with a low, husky voice.

Rachel pinned Chloe’s wrists to the bed feeling her own arms shaking, intensifying the ride.

“It could be way too hard, too rough, almost violent, but her pirate wanted more. She always wanted more, but sometimes was too averse to request it. Rachel didn’t even have to ask if it was fine, if it was ok, it was more than obvious. Her hands were shaking from exhaustion, but she was nowhere near giving up. She noticed Chloe’s legs were tangled behind her waist, adding more pressure to the steadfast pace. She wanted it harder? Fine.

She put Chloe’s leg behind her head opening her even more, like she had never done before. Her own personal fantasy just got fulfilled, wish granted. Rachel always wanted to do it, but always seemed to brave, too bold for their play. Nothing was too bold now. She kissed her ankle, stroking the line of the calf, creating another wave of shivers and thrusting harder. Chloe almost lost her mind feeling her deeper. She got it all.

All. Everything.

When she came, it took a good minute or even more, with two long screams. Rachel dragged her closer to feel all those cries and tension, sense them on her chest, and then slowly released her grasp, freeing Chloe’s leg and finally pulling out, this time for good. She rolled over by her side, exhausted, amazed, and not sure what the hell just happened.

Chloe was just lying there, panting, with her eyes closed, with her palm on her forehead. Rachel peered at her getting rid of the toy, so she could hug her without poking around with this stupid rubber thing. She wanted to say something but was left speechless looking at her wife. Fuck yeah, that was her wife, damn it. Oh wow.

“That was… hella intense.” Chloe finally verbalized something between the gulps of air, too
shattered to actually remember about being shy. She usually had gotten so shy after.

Rachel brushed her hair, then stroked her arm, tracing the lines of the famous tattoo, still lying by her side and gasping loudly. They both didn’t have strength for a passionate kiss, even if it was very much needed. Her girl was so exhausted that she almost didn’t respond to the touch.

“It almost felt like you were missing something.” She joked a little and laughed a bit, captivated, astounded and still in awe. Her own blue wonder, her own pirate treasure.

Chloe took a deep breath, then another one and looked at her impishly.

“Yeah, you inside of me.” The blue voice was cracking and hoarse and feeling her hand sliding on her thigh, almost broke in half. “No, not another round, don’t even think about it.” Chloe stopped the attempt weakly. She was really done.

Addicted to her touch, to feel her under the skin, Rachel just started to draw something on her chest with the invisible marker of her fingers, trying not to provoke anything and avoiding any sensitive areas. Chloe was built out of sensitivity though, so she reacted regardless even if her body didn’t want to move.

“I prefer to think about this than other possibilities.” She murmured, getting hit by some dark thoughts. One more reason why they didn’t do it very often. Chloe’s boy-toy phase was short and not so sweet, she never bragged about it or mentioned her sexual experiences on the other side of the moon, but her wild responses made Rachel uneasy. They hadn’t even tried to attempt it after Frank, probably because of the same reason. No one liked comparisons, even if nothing could compare, and it was plainly silly to think that way.

Her girl frowned and then laughed freely, even if every single sound was still burning her dry throat. She knew what it was about. “Are you still jealous? After all those years?”

Guilty as charged, the blond devil focused on another drawing, paying a lot of attention to the details. It could be a dragon, a flame, or just her name being written. Creating a masterpiece required a lot of attention so she could get away from her sight, but not from the answer.

“Baby, I’m gonna be always jealous. And what we just did...” She sighed quietly. “It’s not about the fact of who was the first, it’s about the fact that I…”

Her chin got lifted and her gaze was infiltrated by the blue wry question.

“You are seriously thinking that I might want something or somebody else? After what we just did?” Chloe rolled her eyes, smiling feebly. “I married a crazy, wild arsonist, who is also delusional. Great.” She rose her hands in a helpless gesture. “And I thought I had trust issues!”

Rachel laughed with her and moved closer for a proper kiss. Another common shower wouldn’t be a bad idea and the sheets should really be changed, but the night was still young, and something was telling her they weren’t as done as they would presume.

They would never be done.

“You do have trust issues.” She purred, taking off the damn harness. “That’s exactly why you’re gonna do it.”

“Do what?”

“It’s my turn, you selfish monster.” And this lit up a very dangerous blue fire in those blue eyes.
Chloe immediately got all her strength back. Well, the last scraps of it.

Some equipment got switched without many words spoken. Chloe hated this part and really preferred it to be as quick as possible. Rachel, who was considering a smoke just after this amazing upshot, found herself turned on again and her hips jerked a little subconsciously when her body realized what was coming.

“Because of me being jealous, me having trust issues, or because you are still turned on?” Her girl asked flirtatiously, fully ready to take over.

“Does it matter? All three.” Rachel winked and then her body tensed feeling her hand between her thighs. “Chloe...”

“Yeah...” Another frisky smirk, even more playful now, when Chloe felt how ready she was. Rachel was indeed so close to come during the previous round and had to restrain herself not to finish right here and now. A few more moves and the innuendo would change into the final moment.

“Take me.” She whimpered, pretty sure Chloe’s hand would be more than enough but damn, she really wanted to experience it, get the same treatment. Not that she hadn’t been taken like that before though. Some limits got erased, some barriers got broken and everything had started anew, rebooting and resetting, forcing them to discover everything again.

Chloe looked directly into her eyes when she entered and ate her moan when it vibrated in the steamy air. This soft sigh was always making her dizzy, gifting with a sweet shiver. She started slowly and firmly, and way too aroused to pay back being gentle. Rachel didn’t help either, biting and scratching her shoulders like crazy. It took Chloe seconds to start losing control along with herself in the moment. One long moan and the blue pirate got adrift. The anger, everything she was experiencing the last few days was getting unleashed, released with every single stroke. Rachel’s hands on her back, her eyes tightly shut, lips partly open…

Was it like that with Frank?

She couldn’t think about him, not now, not during this moment, but the thrusts became harder, the pace speeding up regardless. Rachel choked, but played within the rhythm, keeping up even if baffled by the sudden change. Chloe growled and grabbed her hair pulling back, getting forceful, almost violent, possessive. Her girl moaned louder, loving every second. Licking her lips but not kissing, Chloe put even more strength into the ride.


“Baby, slow down.” The whisper was soft, not demanding but simply pleading. She tried to do so, almost failing them both in the process. Becoming wilder came effortlessly but calming down to being gentle and tender was almost out of her reach. Almost. It took a long moment to win this battle, way too long. Chloe choked. Her girl threw her head back feeling the right pace.

“Rach.” She whispered very softly, on the contrary with her moves, so rapid and harsh.

Frank. Fucking her girl. Frank. This goddamn. Fucking. Asshole.

She got stormier and way faster. Rachel responded gladly following, with her eyes wide open. Chloe stopped listening to her, thinking about things she shouldn’t even remember about, recalling the slapdash notes, the fucking seductive smile on the faded color photos. She cried shortly almost losing it completely and then she felt her girl’s palm on her cheek.
“Baby…” Rachel bit her lip, wondering where the blue mind went. She suspected the reason behind the hasty swift and was more than hurtful. “Slow down, you are getting too hard.” She whispered again, asking for another chance, another approach.

Chloe shook her head waking up. Fuck the past, Frank could go to fucking hell. She was inside of her girl, her wife now. This guy couldn’t ruin this, no one could. Why did she have to snap in the worst moment? Why now? It was time to fix it. She had to do it right. She wanted to.

“Rach…” She murmured and got slower, more sensual, exactly what was needed. It was too late to stop the violent storm though, they had gone too far. No one wanted just one senseless and rapid act though, they strived for something more, had to work for it. Rachel didn’t complain though, just asking for a little bit of patience and care.

She got it all.

“Chloe…” Her name got repeated, the blond fever was bringing her closer.

It was hard for the blue rebel to control herself, being too torn between her own struggles and wishes. Rachel didn’t let her to just run away, putting her hands on her hips, directing a little. It was usually so hard for Chloe to open up that much, to show the whole fusion of emotions, and she wanted them all. She wanted it to be real, even if bittersweet at some point. She signed up for the full package.

“Rach?” Chloe asked, but her girl just nodded, confirming that everything was alright and there was nothing to be afraid of.

“I’m here.” She heard. “Don’t stop.” Rachel added, knowing it was hard, it was so hard for Chloe not to drown in anger, not to drift away. Taking over, guiding her would be a reasonable idea, but she was done with being rational. She wanted fire, a destructive, purgative blaze that would end those doubts, those questions, even if rich with a severe outcome.

She found Chloe’s hand, bit her fingers, licked them and guided her to her breasts. This level of intimacy required some unique motivation. It worked. Her girl went wild. She went fucking crazy finally understanding how Rachel wanted to be taken. She didn’t want to control shit. Her hands painfully scratched Chloe’s arms provoking, inviting, wanting.

“Oh…” And she opened her eyes exactly the moment when she came.

They were left breathless for a longer while. Chloe wanted to move, but her girl didn’t let her, still experiencing it, still feeling it, still pleasantly sore. Hence, she held her instead, kissing slowly and hoping it wasn’t too much. Rachel blinked a few times, still with the golden hair covering the pillow, with the frantic, hot breath cutting the shape of her lips.

Something was not right though.

“Rachel, are you crying?”

“No.” And then she sobbed harshly.

Chloe pulled out immediately, but Rachel didn’t seem to notice, now curled up and crying, blending tears with sweat and her own desperation. It was painful to just leave her for a second like that, not being able to fight this shocking sadness with her. The blue confusion hated those fucking toys always in a way, always more complicated to get rid of them than to put them on. Finally free, she embraced her girl, stroking her hair, consoling, calming down.
“Rachel, sunshine, my love, what happened?” She asked, close to a panic.

The sobs intensified despite Rachel’s extreme effort to keep everything inside. She was too stripped already, she couldn’t hide shit.

“Nothing. Everything.” She cried out.

Blaming herself, feeling so damn guilty, Chloe was frantically trying to hold her, protect even from her own fears. She shouldn’t let herself go that far. Her own stupid inner over-thinker had ruined this moment, her own thing she couldn’t deal with had to step in and get into this play. It was so unnecessary, so upsetting, so fucking hurtful. Chloe failed. She had failed her again.

“Sunshine… Did I go too far? Was it too hard?” She finally found enough courage to ask.

“No. Not at all.” Rachel sniffed and even tried to smile. Little fucking warrior, this one. “It was amazing, and… It’s just… I can’t tell you this. Not now.”

Frank? Was it about fucking Frank? Chloe was holding her, slowly rocking her in her arms until the sobs stopped wrecking them both and changed into weak, feeble sniffles.

“Oh. It’s ok.” She said only, unsure as always.

Rachel nodded rapidly.

“It is ok. Finally, it is.” She snapped, sensing what her blue confusion had in mind. Again. “You are the only one I needed and wanted from the get-go. Why didn’t I see it before? Why did I try other shit? Why did I let you fucking leave and drink to fucking death? Why was I so fucking stupid and selfish and so fucking scared, and… I treated you like a piece of shit so many times, for years, and I can’t really forgive myself. I would fucking slap this young stupid kid I was so fucking hard…”

Chloe held her hand in place, scared that she would indeed slap herself or even them both. No self-harm was acceptable though, and despite of all the odds and weird past, she was here to stay and protect. Tender, so tender right now, overwhelmed and even more united in this explosion of anger, she let her to bury her face in her neck, humming softly.

“Hey, you are talking about my woman.” The blue whisper was always calming Rachel down. Price’s magic or some shit. “Don’t slap the fuck out of her. She’s good. It took her some time, but she got her stuff together. Better late than never, right? And I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

Rachel broke off from the tight embrace that started to be a little bit too tight and too frenetic. She didn’t want to hide anything, she was so done with half-truths, almost happy that Chloe found out about the photos, about the whole misery. It was done lastly, no more scary secrets stashed. For the first time in her life she really felt she could trust someone completely, open up and cry, share all her qualms. First time without her guard up, what a relief.


“Soulmate?” That’s probably the last thing Chloe expected to hear after being fucked with a strap-on and returning the favor. The blue eyes opened widely.

The adorable confusion on her pirate’s face made Rachel laugh and cry even more. Damn you Chloe, you were so damn clueless and so amazing in your own ignorance. She kissed her once, then again, then a few more times. This crazy bastard was hers. One more kiss. Only hers.
“Yeah, soulmate. I can’t. function. Without. You. At All.” She sniffed, poking her chest with every following word. The tears stopped making an appearance. Good, she might need to save some of them for later. Something was telling Rachel Amber, damn, not Amber, Price, that she might melt down a few more times in this motel bed, now being entirely helpless and ready to give herself away without hesitation.

It wouldn’t be a sad cry though.

“Copycat.” Her rebel winced, still a little bit aback. “Rachel... You are my miracle. The best thing that ever happened to me. You…” Chloe took a deep breath. “You are my wife.” She said it aloud for the first time ever, somehow finally making it true.

***

This is Chloe Price. Leave a message or not. Peace.

Yet another nightfall tensed with more questions and fear, yet another nightmare that didn’t let her to stay in a warm bed but forced to sit on the dark carpet of the dorm room, fully dressed and ready. Just in case. Just in case something would change, a message would pop up, a call would get returned.

This is Chloe Price. Leave a message or not. Peace.

Maybe Steph was right, maybe they were really fucking each other’s brains out in one of their secret places, deciding to bail out, too stressed and overwhelmed by the school, parents and life in general. Perhaps they had already forgotten how everybody was looking for Kelly Davis, even if she had left a letter. They didn’t leave anything, even their room was wiped clean. The truck disappeared, along with their wallets, credit cards and a few personal belongings. That was it, no more leads, no tracks to follow, no places to go and look for them.

Max had checked them all though. Many times.

This is Chloe Price. Leave a message or not. Peace.

Steph was still sleeping peacefully, not disturbed by the potential horrors and not worrying much. Max envied her so much, she was so jealous of the rational way of thinking, the logical explanation. At the same time, she couldn’t understand how her own girlfriend didn’t share her own concerns. Steph was by her side, still supporting her no matter what, but the things between them became complicated, to put it mildly. Everybody had their own limits and Max knew she had crossed the lines too many times and in too many places.

This is Chloe Price. Leave a message or not. Peace.

Was it the same for her pirate friend when she couldn’t find Rachel? When she tried and tried to reach her for hours, days, weeks, months even? Did she call her over and over just to hear her voice, still cheerful and alive, still almost close, but yet so far away? Was it Max’s punishment for playing with fate? Was it the price she had to pay?

So many questions, no answers, no solutions. She called again.

This is Chloe Price. Leave a message or not. Peace.
A moth knocked on the window in a surge of desperation, lured by the glimpse of the nightlight. The fight against the glass wall was already lost, but the little fellow didn’t give up crackling and whirling on the other side. It was amazing how tenacious this creature could be even in the face of failure.

The shadows of the blinds, the dark calmness around always made her think about her own failures and things unfinished, and Rachel had a lot to reflect about in that department. It was their last night here, the last rest in peace. The short vacation they had taken carelessly, was coming to its end in just a few hours. Jumping back on the driver’s seat, drive back in a clattery, rusty truck had never been anticipated with such nervousness. Rachel Price was nervous indeed, and this state was getting worse with every passing minute and a moth’s tap on the window.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Here they were, veiled down and hidden, promising each other to sort things out, find answers and solutions, but no serious talk had happened, no issue got debated. They drowned in their own celebrations, repeating them over and over, tasting the freedom in all the possible flavors, but Arcadia Bay was waiting, decoying them back with all its issues pending. One layer of problems got covered with another, instead of scrapping it out to the raw bottom and Rachel was scared, so scared it would hit them both in the face as soon as they reached their home. School, parents, friends and the enemies had been kept in the dark so far, but she knew it was time to shed some light, beam them with the update. It might be perilous and even deadly, just like hitting the motel window was risky for one the night’s butterflies.

Marriage gave her insomnia or improved the already existing condition. Rachel was lying in the dark, listening to her girl’s breathing, fascinated at how the rays of light were dancing on her bare forearms, glittering over her tattoos and bruises, old scars and invisible tracks of kisses.

Tap. Tap. Tap. The moth still didn’t want to give up.

They hadn’t solved shit nor argued over the external and internal traumas that had happened, keeping everything unspoken. There was always another day, another hour, the legendary later, and then the time had flown, leaving them with nothing but a paper, tattoos and more dark thoughts they both needed. She sat on the bed, careful not to wake up her blue treasure, reaching for her shirt to cover her shiver. It was still damn cold and chilly, even if the heater was finally turned on. Something wasn’t working right, with the predetermined warmthness unwilling to come.

Frank. Marriage. Their future. A gun in the car. Joyce and David. Blackwell. James and Rose. Long Beach. Money. College and Arcadia. Max and all her secrets. It was enough to warm herself up trying to arrange and address those issues. Everything at once, so impertinently waiting, and Chloe, her Chloe, was sleeping co comfortably, so untouched and intact. Envious of her freedom and content with it at the same time, Rachel lit up a smoke, still watching the moth fighting.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Maybe she should open the window, even if she hated those creatures with a passion.

“My lion.” The deep blue sigh lanced the humid heaven, pierced the wooden panels on the walls, and brightened up the soft light. “My very own private lion.” Perhaps it was the burn of tobacco, maybe the lack of arms around her, but Chloe opened her eyes reaching for her, searching. “Where did you go, Rach?”
The blond sinner winced hearing being named that way. Frank Bowers, the mistake, used to call her his lioness. Rachel hated it but never said a word, keeping it inside like many other things, and this term always tasted weird, like a mixture of perversion, a supposed ownership and ‘The Lion King’ fetish. It wasn’t the right time to dwell on it and there was more to it. Frank had done worse things than just giving her titles she didn’t like to remember.

“I’m right here.” She answered simply. “I didn’t want to wake you. I’m sorry I did.”

Tap. Tap. Tap. Chloe stretched and sat back by her side, opening a bottle of water and taking a long sip. Too lazy to find her brand new shirts on the floor, she just wrapped herself in the blanket, selfishly taking the whole cover. Rachel didn’t mind.

“Chloe?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re married.” She whispered, and saying it aloud made her feel better instantly, just like murmuring a magic incantation. Her blue treasure smiled, but stayed silent still digesting the word, savoring it, getting used to it. Rachel knew her well and could wager that her girl tried very hard to find a witty response, some nice joke, something to make it less formal and official, but at the moment all weird comments were busy, please call again later.

“Yeah, we are. We’ve always been anyway.” Another spiral of smoke joined her own exhale. The blue pirate wouldn’t miss the opportunity to keep her company breaking the motel rules yet again and felt obligated to in the ritual of discerning. Sitting side by side in a tangle of sheets usually meant serious talking. Smoking never failed to help in the process.

“For real.” The next puff of greyness made them both smile vaguely. “I’m Rachel Price now.”

Another dose of silence, Marlboro stillness humid with anticipation. The tapping on the window got louder, then almost disappeared, covered by the sound of a passing train in the distance. Portland was rich with trains and moths equally.

“Rachel… Price…” Chloe finally pronounced it. “Damn, it sounds so… so…” How did they call it?

Another gasp of smoke should comfort her, but it didn’t.

“New?” Rachel’s whisper was very quiet, fragile and broken. They had never discussed a last name change and it almost felt forced, written down in the last minute. Was it a mistake? A thing rushed? A reason why they didn’t talk much? Her blue rebel was avoiding the subject for the past few days, cracking jokes, winking but visibly uncomfortable when confronted directly. It was a big deal though. It was a very big deal for Rachel now Price.

Tap. Tap. This moth was damn persistent. What a stupid creature.

“No, not new.” Chloe shook her head watching the dark spots on the ceiling, pleasantly intrigued. She expected to be faced with saying the new name aloud and was curious about her own reaction. “It’s… Good. Damn fitting. Like the last piece of the puzzle got in its place or some shit. Hey, hey… Why are you crying?”

Rachel brought her knees close to her chin, shielding herself from a short wave of sobs. It seemed silly to cry again, after so many sniffs shared, but it was the only possible way to embrace the respite. Somebody hugged her close though, almost scorching with a cigarette, and kissed her head showing it was fine. She had predicted to cry more soon anyway and here they were both wiping her tears. Tap, tap, said the moth. Yet Again. Fine.
“I’m crying…” She wept. “Because it’s true.” Her shoulders rose in a helpful gesture. “Because I climbed my fucking Everest.”

“Everest?” Chloe wasn’t an expert in metaphors and this one baffled her completely. “Are you suggesting that I’m a huge, frozen mountain?” She ditched the smoke, exchanging it for hearing Rachel’s heartbeat close. Stress. So much stress. Everything so locked inside.

“No, you dork.” Her wife shrugged lightly. “I’ve always thought that getting on some famous peak was ambitious and hard to do, but there is nothing more satisfying than to keep you happy, to keep us both together. It’s actually harder than getting my ass on any stupid mountain. This thing that we have, that we built and saved against all the odds... This is my Everest. I’m officially yours and you will stop with this ‘oh she’s gonna leave me’ shit.”

The moth disappeared or died on the other side, leaving them in more silence, pressing for answers. Chloe, still torn and confused, tried to craft her response carefully, prepare herself to be this responsible adult that was requested. She didn’t know shit about being a grown-up, she had never wanted to obtain those skills and knowledge.

And yet, it was needed.

“Well, there is always divorce…” She murmured, regretting the words immediately. Even her own gift to fool around disappeared, leaving her even more perplexed. Rachel responded with a short, violent sob slapping her in the face with shame and guiltiness.

“Please, Chloe…” That was what it was for her? A joke? A short-term solution that didn’t solve a thing? A revenge? “If you ever mention it again…”

The blue pirate was always growing in desperation, trying to fix things feverishly. The kisses and smiles didn’t help much this time, the line had been crossed. One slippery slope, one morbid joke too far. Divorce? Hell no, over her dead body. However, Chloe Price always had a problem to adjust, to accept the change, even if beneficial, even if it was a dream that came true.

“I won’t, I promise.” Calming Rachel down was like fighting with a forest fire. She gushed a few flames, but another lonely spark was starting an alternative hell in the meantime. “I’m sorry, so sorry. Stupid joke.”

“Stupid.” Chloe got pushed away and had to fight her way back. “Stop with the fucking doubts. I’m all yours, shut up and deal with it.”

Just claim your ownership already, Chloe.

They fought for a moment in silence, trying to be close and away at the same time. The blue pirate noticed how overwrought her girl really was, how tense and edgy. It was time to stop indeed, to cash her own check of hesitations, exchange it for some decent cash of trust. Change. Didn’t they come here for a transformation?

Tap, tap. The moth was back.

“Fuck yeah, you are mine. I won’t let you go, sunshine. Not a chance.” Chloe smiled, smiled so widely and then added in all seriousness, not shying over even if it cost her a blush or two. “Why did you decide to take my last name?”

Rachel hunched inside the embrace.

“Chloe Amber would sound hella weird.” She murmured.
“It wouldn’t, and you didn’t answer my question.” Chloe didn’t want to force it, didn’t want to push but it seemed important to know, essential to ask at least. Stupid how such a surprise could make her so happy and unsure at the same time.


“So, you are the only one who has this last name, except your uncle, I guess. Your mom changed it to Madsen and it just felt like you are the only Price in Arcadia Bay. One sad lonely pirate. I had to fix it.” Yes, she liked fixing things. That was one of the very few things that Rachel and Max had in common, both obsessed with changing stuff for the better. “And also... to honor your dad somehow. I know it’s important for you, you missed him a lot, you still miss him.”

As expected, it left Chloe speechless. She always strived for honesty but comforting with it was usually shattering her to pieces.

“You did it for me…” Adorable stuttering was back. “…For my dad… for…”

“For closure, I guess. For legacy maybe. That’s how they call it. And I’ve always wanted it anyway.” A short sniff was an official end to the whole crying shit. “I always get what I want.”

Legacy. William. Her father. It was sudden. Chloe had never thought her girl would remember, wonder about these things, it was always her struggles only. Now she got confronted with care and love she barely recognized and embraced before. Suspecting the whole time that this step was taken because of Frank’s dirty possessions, the blue pirate had to sit back, running her fingers through her hair and trying to compose herself, calm the fuck down.

“You have no idea what I’m feeling right now.” She gestured weakly, painfully sincere. “What about your parents’ legacy?”

“I was adopted.” Rachel shrugged remembering about the half dead smoke. Damn, they would have to pay the penalty anyway, the annoying code of conduct. “My last name is surrounded with lies, abuse and events that never should’ve happened. I feel yours even more having this last name.”

Chloe rested her forehead on her hand, adjusting and putting herself together. She was so damn whole a second ago but falling apart had never been so sweet before. Calm, she had to be calm, but she didn’t want to. Why was she so afraid to ask before? She couldn’t remember.

“Rachel fucking Price.” It sounded better every time. “Rachel Dawn Price.”

“Uh-huh.” Rachel smiled, for the first time this evening. “Now I have to change all my legal documents. Satisfied? Everything, from the driver’s license to my future high school diploma. Everything will be in my new name.”

The world of possibilities and potential adversities unraveled itself in one shift move. Suddenly it wasn’t just a name, a few verses to repeat, but a handful of steps, hardships, celebrations, documents, taxes, and God knew what else. Adventure. Their adventure.

The careless rebel blinked.

“You will graduate under my...”

“Under our…” She got corrected.

“Under our name…” Chloe gasped. “I didn’t think about it.”
“You have a tendency to forget. It’s fine. This tattoo will remind you though. It will remind you for the rest of your life.” The wedding band got caressed, circled in a soft touch and it would be a crime not to kiss this hand, not to take advantage. Rachel smiled again and then took a deep breath. “Anyway, do you want to call Max... and Steph, and tell them?” The list of people to inform was pretty long, but Chloe’s best friend would be first in line. They both knew it.

The blue rebel looked at her sharply, lighting up another cig and abruptly exhaling the first drop of smoke. “I don’t want to call anybody.”

Her girl frowned, surprised by the sudden and harsh reaction. It was a sacrifice on her part to suggest it though, she wasn’t very keen on sharing Chloe with anybody, especially in the middle of the night and after that kind of conversation.

“Keeping it as a secret? Marriage doesn’t work that way.”

The blue pirate scoffed, trying to wrap herself in the sheets again. It was way easier to stay bare and naked, and she finally gave up, throwing out the blankets. Managing a few tasks at once wasn’t her forte and had never been. The cold could be useful to keep her mind in place and focus on one thing only. Sort this shit out.

“No, keeping it secret for now. I want to tell them in person. I want to take your hand and show you off telling them ‘This is my wife.’” Oh Jesus, this word again. Chloe cleared her throat. “This is my wife who took my name. This is the girl I met years ago, the hottest cheerleader in school, who I married and then fucked her brains out at a motel.”

“And she returned the favor.” Rachel had to laugh. Damn, they really didn’t do anything else except make love, eat and sleep from time to time. “You don’t have to brag about this part though.” She added just in case.

Chloe took a long inhale of smoke narrowing her eyes, listening to the soundtrack of a desperate moth. Tap, tap. She didn’t care. This flying worm could die outside as far as she was concerned. Challenging the boundaries was part of her nature, so the blue rebel stretched lightly and murmured: “What if I want to?”

Their eyes met and narrowed at the same time. Telling stories about what happened behind the closed door of room number 237 was out of the question, it was their secret, their memory. Everybody would suspect what occurred inside those walls though, it was a given.

“You are a monster, terrible fucking amazing, loving monster.” Rachel tangled her fingers in the blue hair, almost ready to kiss her but then stopped herself in a painfully awaited question. “Can you forgive me?” She then backed off, not sure how to react.

Chloe didn’t let her to run away, watching her way too carefully.

“I already did.”

“Can you forget?” Her blond sinner tried to escape with her gaze and failed. Her blue rebel wasn’t rebellious, wasn’t tough or angry. Finally trying to absorb what understanding meant, she just nodded.

“I’m hella forgetful anyway. Rach...” Chloe tapped the ash out and scratched her head. “Would you mind if I’m gonna kill him?”

Rachel’s eyes grew wider.
“What!?” Her hand grasped the water bottle tightly, almost crashing it into one synthetic mess. The thin plastic containers, always crackling and crunching, were making every sip so fake and uncomfortable. Chloe always preferred glass. Beer and water tasted way better, and she could use it later as a weapon or smash it against the wall. Just for kicks.

Tap, tap. The moth warned them again.

“Well, you know…” The blue scratching continued. “They have like special marriage visits in jail… We can pretend it was self-defense and shit.”

Her wife was watching her for a very long moment, finishing her water and exchanging it for yet another Marlboro. They both knew it was only partly a joke and Chloe hated this fucking asshole with a passion. There were more reasons to despise him and Rachel was pretty much aware that disclosing a few more burning secrets would drive her blue treasure to the edge. She would murder this dipshit in a heartbeat because of voluntarily left notes and a few pics. What would she do, knowing that Frank hit her girlfriend, that he got so violent, scaring Rachel to death? What would she say knowing that months ago her own blond angel had to hide a few bruises here and there?

A gun in the car. A moth behind the window. Tap. Tap.

“There are no visits if you get the death penalty, unless you meant the afterlife, and no self-defense applies to a cold-blooded murder. He is not worth it. Nothing is worth it.” Rachel slowly released the smoke. “Chloe, if you want to kill him, I’m gonna do it.”

It sounded so serious that the blue pirate got pale. She didn’t really mean to hurt Frank, it was just a talk, not even a joke, an expression. A few gory options had been considered of course, some glass bottles smashed at the junkyard and in the garage, but Chloe would never act on her anger. Her chest got heavy. Scary. It got really scary.

“What?” She choked on her own smoke and started coughing.

Were they planning a murder now?

“If you want to have him dead, I’m gonna do it, not you.” Rachel shrugged, supposedly indifferently. “You can’t hurt a fly. I’m serious.”

The moth clattered over the window in one desperate swirl. Chloe knew her girl was right, she was harmless, a bulldog without its fangs, an angry kid without willpower. Big mouth, no action, not that kind at least. Feeling stupid and lost between the slumbers, the only thing she could kill was the embers of her smoke. Scary how a few words could backfire with such severe consequences so quickly.

“You would kill for me?” Chloe asked, still in shock. “You are scaring me, Price.”

Her wife smiled and leaned in for a kiss. “Price. Mhmm... “Rachel hummed. “You’re getting used to it.”

Tap. Tap. Red flannel blended with bare skin, white sheets whispered, stifled the unpleasant thoughts. Some words had consequences for sure, some of them even heavy with the last names. The blue pirate noticed the moth had flown away, untouched and saved from the burning light. One more creature protected from its own deadly wishes.

“The question is…” Chloe smiled, forgetful as always when close to her. “…Are you?”

No deadly wishes. Tap. Tap. Goodbye, moth.
“Tell me!” She kept running after him. “Tell me the fucking truth, Nathan. Did you do something to them?”

He stopped, turned around rapidly, took a step back, then a few forward. Max was mirroring his moves in a nervous manner desperate not to let him escape. Confronting him at night, between the Blackwell halls, was risky and she had to force herself to put this plan into action.

“Get lost, you dyke!” Nathan yelled, as always when he felt trapped. “I don’t have time for your fucking game. Go, take some selfie or whatthefuckever. Disappear.” He waved at her as if she was an annoying butterfly. “Begone. Now."

The little freckle looked around noticing they were alone. Very good, no one would be able to hear their conversation, interrupt it or disturb them. On the other hand, she had never confronted young Prescott alone and knew it could be as dangerous as the questions she was about to ask. No. Not ask. Yell at him.

Nathan Prescott was the last resort.

“Answer me, Nathan!” Max exploded suddenly, tired of walking on eggshells, of an unstoppable stream of worries, of the sleepless nights. She couldn’t even cry anymore. “Did you do something to Rachel and Chloe? Did you?!” She screamed wishing Steph was around her, backing her up, being by her side, protect. Her girlfriend would never approve though, too cautious to accuse anybody. Her and Nathan had some secrets, shared some snippets of the past. Max wasn’t sure what it was, but sensed it was way bigger than just a few names thrown at each other at the parking lot.

“To who?” Nathan scoffed, wrestling out his jacket from her grip. Stupid girl. Stupid! “I didn’t touch them. I wouldn’t touch them with a ten foot pole. Get the fuck out!” He yelled and vanished into the dark hollow hallway, leaving her alone with her fears and shivers.

Nathan Prescott had his own collection of those.

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Motel bathrooms had a long and painful tradition of being extremely gross and tiny, designed as necessity not pleasure. The one in room 237 wasn’t an exception. After a talk in the cold sheets, covered only with scraps of slumbers, they both decided to take a hot bath. Yet another first time, since they had never had the opportunity, usually satisfied with a common shower and bothered by the other inhabitants requesting access to the sanitary miracles.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Rachel asked randomly, after the water calmed down from cheerful splashes and the white tails on the floor were recovering after the sea battle.

“About how hot the bath is or how much this wine tastes like piss?” Chloe winced and took a long sip from the plastic cup, pretending to be a fancy glass. Rachel had revealed one more surprise from her shopping spree, so they could celebrate their last night with a little bit of alcohol. It wasn’t easy to buy it in Portland where everybody was hella reluctant to sell liquor to a minor, but the blond sinner kept some merchandise from her good old days including a fake ID. It came in handy even if she still didn’t look like the 28-year-old woman from Oklahoma.
The wine was terrible though.

“No, about Frank and other stuff you’ve seen or read.” Rachel sighed deeply and hid behind her own cup. It was the last chance for them to talk about it. Tomorrow, locked down in a truck and rushing home, they would think about entirely different problems.

Her blue treasure rubbed her neck, awkward and uneasy.

“We probably should.” She sniffed. “Fuck, I don’t really want to.”

“I just wanted to make sure that we can always talk... I know it’s hard, but I really don’t want any more secrets between us. Not that kind of secrets anyway.”

For a moment she thought that Chloe would give up, refuse, wave it away, reschedule it for another time. It would be a terrible idea, but they both weren’t keen on the prospect of a long and painful discussion.

It was time though. It was damn time.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Chloe whispered finally, lifting herself up a little and moving bit away. Escaping the embrace, even for an inch as a self-defense, but still painful to experience for her blond anger. Understandable though. Painful but understandable. “About the bracelet.”

The water was damn hot, but Rachel felt cold straightaway. They washed away their sweat, sleep and tiredness just to drown into the dirty and nasty past. Pouring more wine helped, just a small gesture to be close to Chloe again, touch her in passing. They really had to clear things up, internally this time.

“First there was so much shit going on at the beginning, with me ditching the drugs and us getting back together that I totally forgot.” She answered carefully. It was damn hard to be honest sometimes. White lies were less hurtful. “It was so fucking not important, comparing to all the hell we’ve been through. You never asked though, and when you did I thought it was too late. We already patched it up, fixed the stuff between us and I didn’t want to fuck it up again. I really wanted to tell you about it in California, but it was never the right time, first the stress, and then my father decided to be a monstrous asshole…” It was difficult to look into the blue eyes all the time, even if she promised herself to do so.

The water swung in a short wave when Chloe moved around nervously.

“And you thought I would never know.” The inside of her plastic cup got all her attention. Red wine was always made her uncomfortable with its taste and structure. Bloody tongue-tying liquor couldn’t even get them drunk, on the contrary. She still wasn’t sure if she should be holding Rachel or be as far from her as the bathtub would let them. On the other hand, how much closer could they be?

Chloe drank the rest with one big gulp.

“I ain’t gonna lie, I hoped so, yeah.” Her wife responded almost at once, and then stumbled upon her own well-crafted speech. “The bracelet... I really thought he just lost it somewhere, threw it out or whatever. I didn’t think it was remotely important to him after I left him the way I did. When I gave it to Frank, well... He was getting very jealous, suspicious that I was just faking the whole thing, and fuck, he wasn’t mistaken. He asked me for proof that I’m in it for good, to convince him somehow. I didn’t have anything else and I wasn’t shitting you by saying this thing didn’t mean that much to me anymore. Frank was somehow linked to Sera, so it fit even more. They both could go fuck themselves with this bracelet. And I preferred to give him this than... other things.” She added and
finished her own drink, praying Chloe wouldn’t ask her to dwell on the other demands. Thankfully, the blue pirate, covered with a white coat of foam and painful yellow marks, just nodded.

“Do you know if he is still in touch with her?”

“What?” Rachel frowned, not sure what Chloe was referring to. It took her a good few seconds to connect the dots. “With Sera? It’s bullshit.” She shook her head, certain it was just one of his tricks, another of Bower’s guiles. “I asked him several times and Frank was always insisting he had no idea what happened to her. Not that I care.”

She cared. Chloe knew she cared, even if her biological mother was a topic unspoken and not discussed for years. Too weird, too difficult, too painful, and was leaving them both confused and helpless.

“Well, he lied.” The blue pirate shrugged. It was somehow satisfying to prove how much was still uncovered, to have a card up her sleeve. “In this planner I got, he noted some info about some meetings or phone calls with her. Sera in the morning, Rachel in the afternoon. Dipshit had game.” Another shrug but with less satisfaction.

“You are shitting me.” The hazel eyes widened in disbelief. “Fuck! Was there anything more about them?” She asked and tried to cover her curiosity with another splash of water.

“Not that I know of.” Chloe splashed back. “I read everything very carefully though. Maybe they have some common business or some shit, but trust me, he knows what Sera is up to.”

Rachel had prepared herself for this conversation for a long time and even overthought most of her possible responses and answers. It was planned and crafted carefully to cause as little harm as possible. No crying, relaxed Chloe, one smooth transition, washing everything down and out of their life. This news left her baffled and tense, throwing her off balance.

“I can’t fucking believe it.” She gasped. “Jesus Christ. What a fucking pig.”

Her blue pirate spoiled her so much with her trust and honesty that she had forgotten how dishonest the world could be, especially Arcadia Bay assholes. How could she believe him in the first place? Why did she assume all his statements to be truthful? Why didn’t she ever check his planner herself? It was right there though, by the bed, by the dashboard. She could look anytime, and he was usually too drunk or too stoned to notice.

Trust. No, no trust. Naivety.

“You… wrote him letters.” Another sharp splash waved the tranquil water. “Very personal letters.”

Their eyes met in a challenge, a contest of honesty and answers demanded. Rachel, used to this game by now, didn’t run away with her gaze even if internally she was still screaming. Here they were, going deeper and deeper. One big well of malodourous water, a can of soaked worms. Thinking about her blue rebel going through those scribbles made Rachel sick and damn nervous.

“More like notes.” She admitted. “I’m so sorry you had to read this shit.”

“I’m sorry I did.” Chloe smiled sadly and then couldn’t control herself any longer. “But why? Why did you bother? What for? For him?” She almost cried, getting back to those letters, seeing them again in the corner of her eye, still well-preserved and safely stored, not burned down in a corroded barrel. They were still real.

Torn between reaching for her hand or for the wine bottle, Rachel chose the latter. Their new tattoos
were glittering, covered with the drops of water. The time for intimacy would come pretty soon, or so she hoped. Now it was business. Cleaning business so to speak.

Damn skeletons in the RV’s closet.

“I kinda wanted to make this thing between him and I... To look normal?” It was hard to explain. Every excuse sounded better in her head than spoken aloud. “I thought that if I recreated the words I said to you... If I shared some dreams... I did care about him at the beginning though. Nothing like between you and me... “She added quickly. “…But when you don’t have anything, every piece of trash seems worth fighting for. That time of my life, I was lying so much to everybody that I had no idea what was true anymore. I didn’t write much though. Just a couple of notes here and there and it wasn’t poetry or high art.”

It wasn’t the style that concerned Chloe. The sentences could be written in broken English or in a different language, it would hurt the same anyway. It was the message that made her trust rotten and weaken.

“I know. He kept them all.”

“I had no idea he would. Frank didn’t strike me as the type who would collect some semi-romantic doodles from a teenager.” She wasn’t sure if she worded it properly. There was nothing romantic about those messages, nothing that personal. It hurt though, hurt both of them.

The faucet tapped a few tears of water. No one moved an inch to end its misery though. They were too comfortable in this awkward moment.

“He really loved you. He still does. He thinks you will come back to him.” This wine wasn’t getting any better. Chloe decided to smoke instead, risking drowning her lighter or splashing the freshly dragged smoke. It would be easier to discuss it while drunk or high, but they had to stay sober this time.

Love. Rachel scoffed. If Frank really loved her he would never do anything to the person she cared about the most. He would never threaten her blue pirate, never come close, never touch her, never dare to hit. It didn’t matter how hammered he was, how angry or livid. Rachel used to think, oh she was so damn sure, that he really had feelings for her, that he really cared. Now she finally understood it wasn’t emotional distress, an undying affection, but lusting. Just nasty, dirty desire, nothing more or less. Blaming herself for months for breaking his heart she finally felt liberated, learning that no heart was broken. He had missed her, sure, and wanted her back of course, but was so selfish in his longing and didn’t care about her well-being.

It wasn’t love. It was fucking.

“Too bad for him.” She said plainly. “Chloe... I cared about him, true, but I’ve never loved him. Not like that. Not like you.” It should be so damn obvious, but it wasn’t. Not for her blue rebel. Rachel tried to explain again. “There was a connection, a common understanding about some things but... That was it. The fucking notes... I was usually disappearing once he passed out and it felt weird not leaving a message. It’s just hard to explain. The fact that I was fucking high as a kite most of the time didn’t help either.” She really didn’t want to blame everything on vice. It was way too easy. “I wanted to tell you, I knew I should have told you, but even thinking of how hurt you would be... How many old wounds it would open... I just... I hate seeing you hurt.” She almost broke down, looking at the faucet crying for her with the drops of water.

The waves of the bathtub got splashed again, when Chloe moved closer and hugged her tightly. “I know. I know, sunshine.” She whispered, stroking the blond wet hair and sharing her smoke. “I get
“I’m sorry…” Rachel murmured. It sounded so stupid, like a word taken from a postcard, a silly ticket attached to a bouquet of flowers. A phrase that didn’t solve anything, but she got forced to use by her own habit.

The blue eyes narrowed in a second. “Stop. Don’t apologize. Please.” Chloe demanded, so tired of hearing those words over and over. “I can’t stand you being sorry every time I want to talk about those things. It’s fine. I got you. We’re married. No apologies. I was just so fucking shocked, you would be too.” A ridiculous squish of water helped to make them smile.

“I would go fucking crazy and destroy this shitty RV of his.” In that case there would be way more drama and yelling. Plenty of yelling. And then… marriage or a breakup, Chloe got it right. “Funny… Even if that was one the most horrible things that happened between us I’m fucking relieved that we are done with it. You know everything, and I don’t have to stress about it. That we can just start… healing?” She suggested, looking at the bruises on her back, arms, shoulders. The one on the leg was particularly nasty. Rachel brushed it carefully hoping it would disappear soon. Some wounds would never heal though or leave vile scars.

“Yeah. We are healing. We are in pretty good shape, except me being wrecked here and there.” Chloe winked impishly and seeing Rachel’s reaction, she rolled her eyes. “I’m joking, it’s fine. I’m kinda grateful too. Kinda.”

Kinda. Maybe. Probably. Dancing on thin ice in the middle of a hot bathtub. Rachel stayed on topic longer than she had ever predicted and needed a relief, a distraction. She kissed the blue hair, then the neck, careful with the passion served. There was still a lot to talk about before they would start round number one thousand, allowing themselves to eat their own moans.

“You will need a new jacket.”

“Hell, no.” Chloe kissed her back, more eager to finish this conversation in some nice pleasant way than chatting. “I like my old one with all the battle scars, I’m gonna patch it up and it’ll be just fine.” It would actually fit her style better than something brand new and shiny. Chloe didn’t do shiny very well, always afraid to damage it, scratch it somewhere. Now she could be less careful.

“That’s why we can’t have nice things.” Rachel laughed. “You are way too sentimental.”

It was true, but Chloe would never admit it. It was her little secret. “This jacket saved my life and you gave it to me. It’s special.” Hella special. “I probably look like fucking trash on our wedding photos…” And then she choked on the last word, hit by the subject that wasn’t touched yet. Pics, photos, snaps, polaroids. Digital images. Printed.

No explanation was needed. She didn’t want to hear any. Then she wanted, and then she gave up again. Photos.

“I think I have to explain those too, don’t I?” Oh Rachel, you brave bastard. “He just liked to take them and was part of the routine, I guess. The less we saw each other the more he wanted. I didn’t think much of it, just put an act and that was it. I wanted to be a model anyway, right? It didn’t feel like anything personal and I was never fucking sober anyway. I’m glad you burnt them down though, that he doesn’t have them anymore. That no one has them.” The answer was said quickly in a lighthearted tone. So afraid to be cut off, to lose her train of thought, Rachel rushed through sentences just to pack and deliver all that was required.

It got received with a tad of silence and a small water wave.
“Would you do that for me?” The question made Rachel blink in disbelief. Was that really the case? Did she want everything that he had and was feeling cheated out? Letting people to take photos of her, even intimate one was never a problem, since she loved being seduced by the dark eye of a camera, but this thought, this idea made Rachel more than uncomfortable.

Everything was Chloe’s anyway.

“Pose for you?” She said slowly. “Like that? If you asked, yeah. I would. Of course, I would.” They both knew it would be way more personal this time and probably would never happen. “Do you want me to do it?”

The blue pirate brushed off some foam bubbles from her forearm and watched her for a moment, still smoking. It was more than a pleasant view, disguised only with soapy water. Her eyes were moving up and down slowly, not shying over what wonders she was admiring. Taking photos? Who needed it?

“No.” Rachel sighed with a relief. Internally. Mostly. “I got the real thing, thank you.” Chloe smirked, then got serious. “I don’t care about some snapshots. You know me. There is only one thing that worries me though.” She pondered, almost done with her half-wet smoke.

“Only one? Alright.”

“I got the stuff from Victoria. I don’t believe Frank gave it to her voluntarily, since he painted my face with his fists because of this shit, so...” The cigarette died in the ash tray. Fire didn’t taste well with water and bubbles. “That leads me to a question: how the fuck did she get it? And how much did she see?”

Being threatened by the fashion snake, or even a possibility of a war over her own decency wasn’t concerning at all. The circumstances changed so much that no school commotion would make her worry. At least for now. Rachel shrugged.

“How she got it I have no idea, but I suspect Nathan had to be involved. He’s the only one from the Blackwell bunch close enough to Frank.” She assumed, even if not wondering much about it before. “And how much did Victoria see...? Let’s be real, probably all of it. She might have a moment of remorse gifting you with this or it was just a planned revenge to fuck us up, but she knows it all.”

The answer made Chloe even more concerned. It was damn beautiful and adorable how much she wanted to protect her from all the dangers. “Are you afraid she would expose it or...”

“No. Not really. The only person I was afraid to show it to, was you. I don’t care about the rest, especially Blackwell assholes. My reputation is already hella damaged, they already think I’m a junkie and a whore…” A finger on her lips stopped her from talking.

“Hey. Don’t you dare…” It was damn hard to bring her closer and cuddle in this small, tiny bathtub. Chloe managed though. “I just don’t want you to be upset because of this.”

It was easy to disregard the potential menace and ignore the high school drama when they both enjoyed their first bath together in a motel, miles away from home or everyday enemies. Rachel could shrug as much as she wanted, but it would hit her and upset her sooner or later. Sooner was Chloe’s pick. Her girl was too sensitive sometimes.

“Well, I can’t promise that.” Her wife aversely agreed. “I will deal with it. Somehow. Eventually.”

“We will deal with it.” Rachel got corrected. “You are married now, I don’t know if you remember.” There was a leverage the blue pirate always dreamed about. Now her girl wouldn’t be able to be so
stubborn to solve every problem alone. “Damn this water is getting cold.”

It was getting freezing, to be perfectly clear. They finally got up even if it required some extensive exercises and it was an achievement to keep the balance not falling down on the wet trails. The towels were still moist since their previous shower, nothing got dry quickly in the capital of rain. Damn you, Oregon.

The coldness of the room hit them as soon as the towels got exchanged for sheets, so they cuddled closer. The blue rebel was seriously considering looking at this heater and try to fix it somehow, unwilling to ask for any help from the motel’s staff. Dragging her toolbox out of the car in the middle of the night and a few hours before the check-out was silly, so she just pulled Rachel closer warming them both up.

“Chloe...” Her girl murmured, and it was a damn serious mumble. “When we get back... I’m gonna talk to him.”

The blue rebel tensed.

“No.”

“I have to.” Rachel and her will to fix things. “I can’t let him hurt you or threaten you again. I can’t. I have to sort it out. He left us be for a long time, but god knows what he will do next. I don’t want to live in a fucking fear that he might do something to you, to us, and we still live in the same town, we still have common... acquaintances.”

Reasonable arguments, Chloe would agree, but nothing was reasonable when it came to Frank and his actions. He tried to kill her over a damn planner. Seeing Rachel could make it even worse. The blue confusion didn’t have any plan on how to deal with the guy, not yet anyway. Reporting him to the police would be nice, but then the strangers would start digging and asking them questions. Not to mention that involving any kind of law enforcement would make Chloe cringe. It was reasonable, true. Too reasonable.

Fuck it.

“It’s too dangerous, Rach.” Seeing how serious her angel was about it, she gave up sooner than they both thought. “If you want to do it, I’m going with you. I won’t let you to meet him alone. Not after what he did. And what I did…” The pirate bit her lip, heated up with the memory.

“Chloe? What did happen exactly?” Oh, those hazel eyes narrowed again. Great. “How did he…”

They should be done with the freaking bath of honesty, but Chloe knew she owed her wife some serious explanation. The assumption that some cuts to her jacket and a few injuries would be enough to stop Rachel from querying was as weak as begging her to change her eye color. Not that the blue rebel would do such a thing. This hazel thing was addicted. Hazel meant life.

“He found me in front of the house and started yelling that I had something that belongs to him. I had no fucking idea he was talking about his planner, and I overreacted a little bit thinking he meant…” Chloe sniffed. “Well, you. The bracelet I saw didn’t help either, so I told him to go fuck himself and he politely refused. Therefore, we had a very nice and fucking courteous conversation about how he tried to steal my girlfriend and how he will never ever get her back, unless over my fucking dead body. He took it literally and, well…” She opened her arms in a theatrical gesture. “Price entertainment presents, we started hell. I think all my neighbors were fucking amused by this shit, eating popcorn and recording this stupid stuff. He got hella angry and he hit me, we stated to fight, and he ruined my new jacket. It would’ve ended way worse if I didn’t have the gun in the glove
compartment…” And here she said too much.

She got rolled over and her sweet and alarmed blond angel looked at her with fear.

“A gun? You had a gun?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t intentional though.” Chloe scratched her nose. “It’s the same toy I took with me the night that Max decided to go all crazy about some old barn. I forgot about it entirely.”

Rachel wasn’t extremely content with the enlightenment. “But it wasn’t loaded. At least you told me so.” She pushed for more.

“It wasn’t but he didn’t know that when I aimed it at him. If it was loaded…” Chloe sighed deeply. “Who knows. I was so close to pulling the fucking trigger, you have no idea.” She closed her eyes thinking about the finger on the trigger, her hands shaking, her internal fucking scream to pull it, to be done with this guy, to shoot him then and there. Lack of bullets didn’t make her scream any less loud.

That had changed everything. Rachel assumed that they just argued, pushed each other, Chloe got a few hits and he had left her alone, done with the drama and scared of the neighbors. Frank Bowers would come after both of them if a firearm was in play, if a weapon was aimed and almost got fired. Now she knew why Chloe didn’t want her to talk to him. Talking was hella useless now, a bulletproof vest would do better.

Alright, this idea was a little bit too dramatic, but Rachel got really scared.

“Oh god.” She gasped. “Do you still have it?”

“The gun? Yeah.” Chloe confirmed, not bothered by potential consequences. Blue John Wayne of Arcadia Bay or something. She always liked toys, now she had a deadly one. “I didn’t come back home after that anyway, so it’s still in the car. David’s gonna crucify me but yeah, I still have it. I wanted to put it back, but it was better to keep it for now. The step-douche might get to me before Frank does and you will become a widow faster than…” She almost got slapped but a kiss had to suffice.

“Shut up.” Rachel warned her. Widow, very funny. “Keep the gun. For now.”

Her blue treasure blinked a few times. “That’s a fucking surprise. I thought you would be angry and shit.”

Her girl rolled onto the other side, leaving her arms empty. “I’m angry and shit but not at you. I…” Oh, she would get corrected again. “We will solve it as soon as possible and I will explain everything to David.”

“Just don’t explain too much.” Chloe scoffed.

Protective. Always freaking protective. Rachel recalled when her girl literally lied in the faces of their friends just to shield her from weird questions and uncomfortable silence. Always so fond of truth she wouldn’t mind forcing them both into a series of dishonesties to keep the secrets where they belonged - in the dark, nasty ditch of their own memories. Only.

“You’re asking me to lie?”

“I’m asking you to be honest with me, not with the step-douche. I don’t want to share this shit with him.” A loud argument at home wouldn’t be as bad as informing David what had occurred. He
would like to be involved for sure, defending them both and that wouldn’t end nicely. The blue pirate preferred to take it upon her own. Somehow.

“Calm down, Chloe.” Rachel frowned, covering them both with a blanket. “I won’t dwell on stuff between me and Frank, but I can’t let him to give you shit because of me. You got fucking beaten because of me. He attacked you with a knife and don’t tell me it’s not true, I’ve seen your jacket. He tried to…” Her voice broke a little. “Kill my baby. My wife. He wanted to take you away from me...” Thinking about the possibility made her almost physically sick. Worrying for hours and calling her, not knowing what happened and then learning about that kind of tragedy was hard to imagine. Rachel Amber, now Price, was gifted with a very vivid imagination though, and she almost fell apart under this vision.

“Just don’t do anything stupid, Rach.” Chloe brought her back, saving her from her own made-up misery.

“Now you sound like my father. I don’t like it.” An angry hiss was somehow a pleasant variety after all those apologetic notes. “What makes you think I would do something stupid? They have marriage visits in jail. Jokes aside, I won’t do anything crazy or... indefinite, and you will be by my side all the time. Deal?”

Chloe wondered about those times she had been by Rachel’s side shielding and protecting, and how much it didn’t prevent shit. When her girl burnt down half of the National Park or broke her parent’s glass table to pieces or when she attacked a drug dealer with a piece of a rotten wooden board. Her blue presence didn’t stop her from doing any of those things, even encouraged a little bit more, gave her power and fueled the fire with the wrong type of oil. On the other hand, what choice did they have? Rachel would confront Frank anyway, it was more than certain.

“Deal.” She answered only, asking kindly for a closer cuddle to keep the already secured warmth between them or maybe heat it up even more.

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“They’ll be here tomorrow.” Max turned off her phone and got back to her meal. Hunger was an estranged feeling lately, but she had finished the dish to the last bite. Steph tried really hard, serving this dinner or very early breakfast, forcing her to eat at least once a day. Lack of appetite wasn’t an excuse.

The fork hit the plate with a quiet clink when her girlfriend leaned back in her chair, abandoning her own dish. Steph didn’t like it, didn’t like it at all.

“Max, it’s not a good idea.” She warned her yet again. It was tiring to hear it over and over. Unstoppable fucking corrections about what Max was supposed to do and what she wasn’t.

The little freckle scoffed and also stopped eating. There they went. Another round of a friendly conversation about how stupid and useless her efforts were and how she had to stop and relax. Jesus, Steph was so damn stubborn and clueless sometimes.

“What?” She sneered. “What’s wrong? I’m taking care of my friends!”

Her girlfriend crossed her hands on her chest, as always when concerned or angry. The latter didn’t happen very often, but Max was sure her last string got pulled. Calling James Amber caused a huge
fight. Asking him to visit Arcadia in person would start a war between them. She could explain his concerns though, the fact that somebody used Rachel’s card and he was certain it wasn’t his daughter, that some weird transaction happened in Portland and he was very worried about her whereabouts. Steph didn’t look like she wanted to listen though. She was done with listening and wanted to be heard.

For once.

“You have to take care of yourself first!” Her girlfriend shook her head. “First Kate, then this shit with the barn, tornadoes, visions, Kelly, and then this. You can’t do it all the time. It’s crazy. It’s draining for you and for me.”

Max mirrored her pose also crossing her arms on her chest, fed up with the whole drama. She expected support and the only thing she was getting was scolding and whining. It should be pretty damn obvious; their friends were in danger and Steph’s way of helping was to cook some chicken.

“What’s your problem this time?” Max said, not bothered that the line had been crossed.

“This time? I’m supporting you all the fucking time even if I know that’s a pile of bullshit. I’m by your side and you don’t even have enough decency to discuss your decisions with me. You forgot about us in this madness! It’s only you and playing god all the time.” Her fist almost hit the table, but Steph stopped herself at the last minute.

Why did girlfriends always have to be such an obstacle when their help was so needed? The right help, rightfully dosed. Chloe was… Would be exactly the same way. Ridiculous concerns, arguments supposedly reasonable, weird claims and yelling. Great, just fucking great.

“I’m not playing anything!” She yelled, even if a fight that was the last thing she wanted. “I just want to help!”

Steph should just stop. She should apologize or say something nice. She should smile weakly or hold her hand, kiss maybe, get back to the dinner. It was done so often before and always calmed Max down. This time she was done with pretending. Her irritation, anger, frustration and worries reached their peak and the only way to solve them was a slippery slope. A downhill.

James Amber visiting. For fuck’s sake.

“No, you just want to solve everybody’s problems even if there are none! You went too far, and I feel that nothing I’m saying matters to you. Just your mission. I can’t function like that. You have to stop it, Max, or…” She took a deep breath inhaling the end of the sentence.

“Or what?” Her girlfriend, her amazing beautiful little freckle was burning it down. Maybe she just liked to see the world burning?

“Or I can’t be with you. I’m sorry.” Steph answered and suddenly felt so cold and empty.
Deals and Roses

Frank Bowers looked at his old, worn-out phone, stroking the uneven, metal edges. His fingers slipped through the cracked screen, briefly scrolling through the contact list and the voicemail messages. He took a deep breath, pulled in his stomach and straightened up, smoothing his shirt a little, just like before an important meeting. It was damn stupid, the person on the other end of the phone wouldn’t be able to see him and, if even, his clothes were stained and rugged already. Frank Bowers hadn’t changed in over four days. He didn’t have anything to change into.

His palms got less sweaty though.

Six unanswered calls and five text messages. Not good. The plastic chair squeaked when he moved swiftly. It was the only whole piece of furniture he could find in his so-called home and was damn uncomfortable, especially when placed on the muddy ground, between broken branches of high pines and grey bushes armed with sharp thorns. The fabric got torn in a few places and Frank Bowers was waiting for the whole seat to collapse at some point, just like his world first fell apart, and then crumpled into one small pile of trash. He really didn’t need any more drama, any more problems or attempts of an extreme makeover of his own life, folding chair included. However, the person who tried to contact him so desperately, cared about him in a weird, peculiar way and might actually help somehow. Help. Funny word. Frank Bowers forgot the meaning behind it, too conflicted, angry and usually way too drunk to help even himself. ‘No fucks given’ was his motto for years, damn wishful thinking, and now it finally came true. No business, no home, no relationship, no memories even. One stupid act of rage, one fucking kid in love and he was done, like a chunk of waste thrown on a garbage mountain waiting to be collected and utilized.

Nothing was left.

Frank sniffed loudly watching the screen again and marking all the new texts as read. His thumb almost subconsciously scrolled through a different set of messages, most of them over six months old. They had been read so many times he could quote all of them easily, including the date and time when they got delivered. He should stop with this habit, give all of them up, delete the whole history, but it was hard to break up with the past, even if the present didn’t want to know him anymore. It was so stupid to fall for her; she was still a kid even now, he should’ve played it differently, not involving himself with this high school drama. Fuck and forget not to fuck himself over. Goddamnit, he didn’t deserve any of this, hadn’t done anything wrong, trying to keep his distance and simply let them be. Being decent didn’t pay that well though. First her, then her girl-toy, and now this. Ah, fuck it.

The phone rang rapidly reading his mind and disturbing the ritual of silly misery. One sharp sound, then another. Vibration. His hands got hot and sweaty again.

“Yeah?” He picked up, trying to sound decisive and even pretending to be vexed, but it was pretty hard to fake anything though. This person knew him way too well and even if Frank Bowers was able to keep part of his secrets safe and locked down he was too easy to decipher, just like an open book, a cracked code. “Who’s this?” he asked, knowing very well who was calling him, but the silence was driving him up the wall. His lips were still puffy and throat still dry from confessing all his worries and concerns to a bottle of whisky last night. It was hard to talk and focus. “What the hell?”

“Finally. I tried to reach you for almost a week, Frank.” He heard while getting up, gripping the phone and pressing it to his ear tightly. The words hit him with an echo of a morning hangover, almost making him dizzy. He walked a few steps, turned around, paced in place. The plastic chair
was summoning him back with its unsteady seat promising to calm down his headache. It was better to stand up though. He felt stronger standing up.

“Yeah. Busy. Stuff happened.” Frank murmured, putting one of his hands in his back pocket. The knife was still there, thank fucking God. At least one thing hadn’t gotten lost in this mess. The touch of the metal blade made him feel better. He kicked a clod of mud, scattering the dark tears of dirt.

“I heard.” The other person choked and got silent again for a while. “That’s not why I’m calling. I’ll be back in Arcadia soon. There are a few things I have to take care of. You know, stuff.”

Frank Bowers closed his eyes and scratched his unshaved cheek. Swollen eyelids were still itching with a lack of sleep, trembling a little. This time the knife in his pocket wouldn’t help with the upcoming storm, any blade was useless against the words. Was it about business? He was out of the league for the big guys like his caller had usually been representing. Or maybe his former friend was the trash collector, ready to plow the garbage dump that his life had become. Ah, fuck it, it didn’t matter. It was hard to concentrate when his head was still pounding, drumming in the rhythm of a harsh wake-up and the whispering leaves. Those trees could be so loud with branches moving back and forth following the morning breeze. Walking. Walking would help though. His old man had always been pacing in circles when annoyed and tense, just after or before he would try his belt on his son’s back in a so-called rightful rage. Frank hated this custom, it had been making him nervous, but now his own steps betrayed him as he was repeating his father’s moves, mirroring them exactly.

He would kill for a beer.

The caller sighed impatiently waiting for any kind of response and it made Frank even more wound up. They had known each other for years, bonded decades ago, when he was just a kid looking for more excitement, and this was the only civilized person who still kept in touch with him despite his troubled past. Not really a friend, not yet an enemy, but like everyone he was connected to for such a long time, they had many unfinished businesses and issues unsolved. A week ago, Frank Bowers would be more than content to hear this voice cracking in his old and worn phone. Right now, he was nervous as hell.

“Coming back? For how long?” He answered sharply, almost barked. “What kind of stuff?”
Demanding answers was never a good way to get any. Fucking hangover was making it harder.

“Not on the phone.” The person on the other side scoffed. “I need your help, Frank.” Judging by the tone of the voice it had to be important and probably urgent. Time and attention, two things Frank Bowers couldn’t offer. “Don’t worry, it’ll pay off for you.” The caller assured him with an invisible smile. It was fucking funny how he could see this smirk, closing his eyes one more time, recalling ever single detail. First the lips would punt slightly, then the corners of the mouth would slowly rise up, showing the whiteness of perfectly straight teeth. Sometimes the smile would be comforting, or be a final, distinctive warning preceding the attack instead.

He had to play it right.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind some extra cash now.” It would seem suspicious to refuse the offer even if he wasn’t willing to help much. Being greedy was usually the best solution to discourage everybody from any intention of using him whatsoever, since asking for a lot of money made people uneasy or would even force them to change plans. It didn’t work this time though. It had never worked with this person.

“Sure, Frank. Sure.” The wide grin was still there, he could sense it. “Cash is not a problem. I will let you know about the details soon. This time pick up the fucking phone, alright?” The short click of the ended call resonated with a grim hollow thump in his head. Sure, who would need a confirmation
from a trash like him? Why not just assume he would do everything for a few green bills with dead presidents printed? Frank rubbed the back of his neck, then inhaled fast, fueled by a sudden rush. When would the caller come? In a few days? In a few hours? He didn’t have much time to sort out his shit. It was an impossible task anyway, but he had to try as much as he could. Fix it, separate those two worlds again, not letting the fates to collide and crush him in between. They had crushed him so many times already.

Frank Bowers, the crash test dummy.

“Alright, huh?” He whispered to the black screen of his phone and then squeezed the device so hard, it almost burst in pieces. The plastic parts cracked loudly under the pressure, cutting his fingers with the splitters of the fractured glass. A few words, one out-of-state talk, and his life got so complicated. Alright? He kicked the plastic chair, knocking it down into the brown puddle of slop. No chance for alright. Not this time. Ah, fuck it.

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They woke up surprisingly early regarding the time they had closed their eyes and drifted into a common dream, tangled in a close embrace. This time the smiles were short and the moves fast when they started rushing and preparing to leave. Everything urged them to sail back though. The slips of blankets didn’t summon them back, still warm from the heat of the naked bodies, sweetened with the passionate fragrance of them both. Their clothes, abandoned on the wooden floor asked to be found and put in order. Even the disproportional deer on the oil painting was evoking them with his distempered eyes.

The tension was almost painfully visible, as the old fears were coming back with the legion of questions rising, and they both wanted to set off before it would cover them with heavy hesitations. Fleeing their escape seemed so weird and unnatural, even if the check-out was at eleven and they really didn’t want to pay for an overstay. Still far away from Blackwell and all of Arcadia Bay’s burden, they both felt the pressure and the bizarre obligation to rectify their world’s order and set back the clockwork toil. A quick kiss, packing stuff, touching her arm for a second, a short laugh, then shower, terrible motel coffee, putting on the dirty shoes, another smirk. Normality.

It felt weird to feel so normal.

They were almost done, fully clothed and prepared to face the cold outside, when Chloe pushed her against the wall and kissed hard. They both wanted to feel it one more time, preserve the flash of fire from the past few days, but the spark wasn’t as strong as usual, almost non-existent. The passion was forced as the blue pirate wanted to wrap her own anxiety with one more sign of desire. She kissed her once, then again, hungry but not starving, and Rachel felt her girl’s lips trembling and hands shaking a bit.

“Chloe…” she whispered, feeling anxious herself. The blue hair was tangled and in disarray, the eyes dark from well-known fright. They were both scared, not to come back even, but to leave this solitude where everything seemed so easy to solve.

“We have to go.” Chloe responded, trying to hide from the watchful gaze.

“Yeah. We have to,” she nodded. The fairy tale had ended. There was no escape from the heavy grey sky and the intricate way back. “It’s cold outside,” Rachel added, striking the collar of the
leather jacket. Speaking in metaphors wasn’t her intention, but Chloe smiled weakly and brought her back closer, sensing the shy request stitched between the spoken lines. Despite the rush she didn’t want to leave either, seriously considering paying for a few more nights. It was too late to change their minds though. They had to face all the shades of the outside, sooner or later.

Sooner felt like a bitch now.

“I know.” The blue pirate kissed her head, not keen on letting her go. “I will keep you warm.” She promised and held her in her arms for a long time, preparing them both and assuring silently that this time, armed with a paper, two fresh tattoos and a new name, everything would be easier and simpler. It was a big fat lie though, but the truth would encourage nothing.

Why did it feel like a goodbye?

Rachel was the brave one who broke off with a long, slow kiss. There was no time to waste and nothing was keeping them here anymore. She almost wanted to be back home already, rest in the solace of their room watching the sunset and calling this day done, but it had just begun. Chloe nodded, sensing the urge, and reached for her hand after they closed the door to room number 237. Rachel was trying to make her cell phone work one more time, but the battery was dead and the device totally not responsive. Pity. She hoped to snap a selfie with them both in front of the motel. It would be nice to have at least one digital memory to show their friends and family, one silly thing to post on Facebook. Her girl scoffed and shook her head dragging her own phone.

“Really?” She murmured, but then shrugged and turned it on for the first time in days. They both got attacked by the numerous sounds of notifications, text messages and unanswered calls, but Chloe scoffed again, ignoring them all, and went straight to the camera. “Smile, Mrs. Price.” She ordered, and the photo was taken, and then another one, with a better kiss.

“You just made my day.” Rachel smiled widely for the first time today.

“With a selfie?” Chloe turned off her mobile, annoyed by the incoming messages exploding it every damn second. She ultimately decided to check all of them when they got back home. No rush. Holy shit, somebody had called her like 63 times. Why couldn’t people just calm their tits and let them get a shotgun marriage in freaking peace.

“With Mrs. Price, you dork.” Her wife winked, content with her delay in that matter. Rachel also didn’t want to start their trip from calling everybody around and explaining their disappearance. Yes, it was reckless not to let them know before, but the whole Arcadia crowd could wait a few more hours.

“It’s getting hella easier to make your day.”

The bags got thrown on the old truck’s seats and they headed to the main office to give back the keys and formally check-out. The cracks between concrete pavement tiles were filled with dark rainwater, informing them kindly that they had slept through a storm. Not surprising though, after a hot bath, a few glasses of wine and the whole night of talking they wouldn’t have noticed even the world ending in flames. Rachel grasped her hand tighter just in case the blue rebel would trip or stumble.

Lacing fingers, they pushed the squeaky door and walked into the warm lobby. Chloe, prepared to face the same annoying jerk they had met four days ago, was pleasantly surprised to see that it wasn’t his shift this time. An elderly, adorable lady welcomed them with a smile, standing up and leaning over the counter. Her heartfelt, kind sight made the day warmer a bit.

“Did you enjoy your stay, my dear?” She asked, taking the keys back and lurking on her computer,
typing some numbers and clicking unexpectedly fast. The blue pirate looked at her wife confused about whether she should pay the penalty for smoking now or after they would be confronted with the accusation.

“Oh yes, we did enjoy it very much, thank you.” Rachel replied instead. They had sinned with the tobacco use, but it wouldn’t be wise to admit it straightforwardly. Chloe and her honesty could keep quiet for a little bit longer. The blond angel had changed a lot but wasn’t so willing to pay for anything if not asked directly. Not really angelic, but she had to unleash her dark side from time to time, especially saving some pirate’s treasure chest and income. Oh damn, their income. One more reason to ignore the fee.

“What brought you to Portland?” The receptionist was oblivious to the knowing tones in Rachel’s voice or she didn’t want to notice how suggestive the response was. “Did you like the city?” She asked, still with a sweet, cute smile, making the sinning angel feel a little bit guilty.

“We just got married.” Chloe stated calmly.

Rachel looked at her in surprise. She expected her blue treasure to be way more hesitant with such an announcement or even declaring it with a blush and her eyes down. Chloe apparently decided that no fucks were worth giving and then she nonchalantly put her hand around the blond shoulder dragging her wife closer. Ah, so it was a challenge, a dare. Take that, old Portland motel. Rachel had to smile.

The receptionist clapped her hands in excitement.

“Oh, that’s wonderful! My son didn’t tell me anything! We would’ve prepared something special!”

“Well, he didn’t know…” Rachel murmured feeling being held way too firmly. “We didn’t tell him that when we arrived.”

The old lady was apparently ecstatic to learn that they had just tied the knot. She adjusted her white, carefully arranged hair and continued talking, going through the drawers of her old desk and looking for something.

“Our first lesbians, dear lord! Where are my manners, I’m Helena. So nice to meet you.” She shook their hands, forcing Chloe to break the embrace. “I’m so happy for you. That’s so amazing! And since you decided to start your new path of life in our place, we are obligated to give you something! You really need a wedding gift!”

“It’s not really…” Chloe murmured, close to informing her that waving the smoking penalty would be more than enough but was cut off instantly.

“I insist! Please wait a moment!” Helena rose her hands and disappeared into the back room, leaving them both baffled.

Rachel giggled seeing her rebel blinking in surprise as she had not expected her bold declaration to be taken so well. They both silently hoped that the rest of the people who would hear the news today would react at least half as positive. The slight reminder of what was awaiting them was a nervous punch to Chloe’s guts as she tried to imagine Joyce and David running around with their hands above their heads happy to gift them with some old trash and calling them ‘their first lesbians.’ Her imagination failed, so she just moved in place, rubbing her neck slowly.

“I really hope it won’t be this terrible deer painting.” She winced, not sure what to expect. The noise of moving rumble from the other room sounded concerning and exceptionally suspicious. Hopefully the motel didn’t stash more paintings created by the same artist. Whoever brought this deer to its life
should consider a change of careers and never touching a brush again.

She got kissed in the ear.

“"I think it’s sweet.” Rachel whispered.

“...
It wasn’t easy to break free from a habit of picking up every single phone call, of keeping in touch with everybody and pretending that everything was alright just for the sake of others. Even now, with her cheeks salted from the whole night of a quiet cry, Max had to struggle with herself to reject the incoming call. She recognized the number though, knowing who wanted to connect with her. Joyce was getting ready to go to the airport to pick up the Ambers. It was kinda funny how a tragedy brought those two families together even if they hadn’t spoken to each other for years, if even. Maybe she had done something right after all, maybe it was needed.

Max Caufield didn’t care about the phone calls, parents of her friends, even Chloe and Rachel. She had forgotten about her nervousness, all the fears choking her day and night, the painful stomach ache and the bizarre faint murmur of voices in her head pushing her to do more and cross every single line. The regiment of her visions and premonitions, always standing in attention, was now discharged and buried under a fresh, almost unknown feeling. There was something more important than being on the quest, always ready to fulfill her mission. She had failed the person she loved the most and burned the bridges down, leaving them in ruins.

Her girlfriend. Herself.

“So, that would be it.” Steph looked at her unsurely, with her hands in her pockets and beanie almost covering her eyesight. Standing at the threshold, she wasn’t inside, but not outside yet, hanging between two worlds, two choices. Max wasn’t deceived though. The choice had been made already.

The little freckle nodded but didn’t get up from the floor, hoping she wouldn’t look as pathetic as she was feeling, cuddling between the simple desk and the old bookshelf. They had talked the whole night, screamed, yelled and cried. Max was too stubborn, too fierce and way too agitated to agree on any compromise, not willing to find any middle ground. When she understood what she had lost, it was too late to take back the harsh words and hissed claims. Steph had enough, she had reached her limit.

“Aren’t you gonna take the rest of your things?” Max sniffed, noticing that her girlfriend took only the necessaries, leaving most of her belongings untouched. Ah, not girlfriend anymore. An ex-girlfriend now. Her chest grew heavy with guilt and a feeble sob.

“I don’t know, Max. Do you want me to take them?” Steph asked sharply, but then sighed and took one step forward. “We just need a break.” It sounded like an excuse, a convenient lie.

The little freckle shook her head, nibbling the edges of her hoodie’s sleeves.

“Yeah, I get it. A break.” She muttered even though internally she wanted to scream so badly, beg for yet another chance, another patient and peaceful talk. It wouldn’t work though. Max had promised her a lot during the past month and none of those words were kept. Assuming that Steph would wait forever, always patient and forbearing, was a big mistake, one of many. Funny, she tried so hard to keep the whole earth spinning in the right direction but didn’t notice her own world falling apart just in front of her eyes.

Steph sighed once again. She really didn’t want this. Fuck, she would do everything to start anew, just like they had done many times before, but it was time for a change, temporary or not. Picking up her travel bag, Steph was so close to walk to Max, hold her, swear that everything would be alright, that they would fix everything in a day or two, that she loved her, damn, she loved her so much, but something forced her to stay in place.

“Do you want me to call you later?” She asked instead, and her voice, so calm and cold, scared them both. Max’s lips were trembling a little, while she wrapped herself in the numb warmth of her own
arms. Steph lowered her head, not able to take this view. She had never been great with break-ups; she cared too much.

“No, Steph.” Her little freckle responded with a scrap of provocation. “I don’t want you to call. We need a break after all, don’t we?”

Gandalf the gay couldn’t find any words of wisdom, so she just nodded, speechless and even more broken. Adjusting her beanie, she closed the door from the outside, leaving her girlfriend, her whole world, inside, ready to take another step and move forward, wherever it could be. Damn, she loved her, but had loved before and it would pass one day, die somewhere inside, along with the memories of the other girls who had left her with her heart broken. She had done everything to keep this relationship alive, to save Max from herself and them from falling apart. Every chance was taken, and every hope had been crushed. Done. Steph sighed once again and started walking through the hallway. She was done.

Nothing was left.

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The road was less abstruse than they had remembered, but Chloe was driving astonishingly slowly, paying attention to the road signs and the speed limit. With every turn, every mile, she was getting more and more anxious and her fingers danced faster on the wheel’s plastic rim. Rachel wanted to believe that the marriage made her girl more responsible and careful, but this assumption couldn’t be more false. Chloe Price wouldn’t be distorted by some papers and tattoos, and if even, it would take years, not hours. Playing with the rose, Rachel was watching her blue devil struggling while pushing the old truck through the mountain road, taking down a few miles from the clock in every other turn. Her finger, cut by the metal thorn, was throbbing with an unkind itch.

“Do you want to stop?” She asked, when yet another car passed them, loudly affirming its annoyance. They had been driving way too slowly, even for a city limit standard. The highway to Arcadia was populated by locals who didn’t like to press the breaks more often than necessary. Chloe, the boldest and wildest of them all, was usually crazy fast, and now the car was hardly tolling through the narrow lane.

“No.” Her blue treasure lied and then slowed down more, sluggishly putting the old rusty truck to end its ride at the green, grassy roadside. She wasn’t as nervous as the last time they had stopped mid-way, although she couldn’t get rid of this weird, bizarre feeling of her mind being held and shaken by some invisible force. The closer they got, the more the anxiety was paralyzing her inside and out, making the drive a pure torture. She knew very well what was bothering her, even if it felt so freaking uncomfortable to admit it. It wasn’t about the past, already explained and discussed, not about the amazing bright present, but about the future; an unknown abyss of doubts decorated by question marks like a bizarre Christmas tree. Arcadia Bay was always something to leave behind, and now, when the whole world flipped upside down, it was their final destination, a strangely unknown land.

Stupid. So fucking stupid. Dumb. Chloe opened the door and jumped outside, not being able to take another serious conversation inside of the old smelly pickup. This truck had seen enough and heard more than necessary. Thankfully, the old engines couldn’t talk. Her stomach was tied in a painful knot just like before an important exam, but the knowledge of chemistry or math wouldn’t be tested this time. The school shit was easy comparing to the upcoming challenge.
Rachel followed her steps, grateful for the morning breeze and a chance to stretch her legs. Her blue-haired devil decided to smoke one before crossing the border of their hometown, preparing herself for the one big jump. She was more than fine with it. Whatever Chloe wanted though. Whatever Chloe needed.

“Are you scared?” Rachel asked, seeing the zippo’s blueish flame consuming the tip of a cigarette.

“No.” Her girl inhaled. “Yeah.” Exhaled. “Maybe.” She winced, looking at the clouds sharply dividing the sky in half with their dark crumble.

Oh. One more painful discussion. One more hardship before they would be able to reach the safe harbor. Rachel felt vertiginous again, almost as nervous as the last time they had talked. Would it ever end? What was wrong this time?

She lit up her smoke too.

“What’s bothering you, baby? Parents? School?” Chloe shook her head, not really giving a rat’s ass about those issues. Joyce would be angry, of course, Wells wouldn’t be amused, but everything was more or less manageable. She could deal with this shit, no problem, as it was done before. Rachel swallowed hard and came closer, brushing the blue hair from the frowning forehead. “Bowers?” Even saying his first name was making her skin crawl. It was easier with the formal surname.

Chloe took her hand and between the drags of smoke, kissed the cut finger. Stroking the wedding band, she lowered her sight and then finally moved back a little, as if afraid for a possible retaliation.

“You.” Her lips moved in a quiet, weak whisper.

Taken aback Rachel blinked, not sure if the cold shiver running through her spine was a sign of fear or a built-up anger. Her girlfriend, and now wife, was afraid of her after all of this? Was she still thinking about those fucking photos and notes suspecting another betrayal?

“Me?” She repeated. “You think I will call it off?” The blue hair danced in a snappy shake. “You think it was a joke?” Another shake. Rachel bit her lip. “Do you regret it?”

“Regret?” Chloe snapped, scratching her temple. “Jesus, of course not! I’m just a little bit... Fuck, I don’t know how to say it...” Wanting to break free and walk a little bit further from Rachel would require pushing her away. The blue rebel needed space to talk and breathe, not being bothered with such attention. She hated being surrounded by her in moments like this. It was making it harder.

“Afraid?” Rachel tried, even if she wasn’t sure what it was about.

Chloe rolled her eyes. “No.” She shrugged. “Yeah.” Another shrug. “Maybe.” Alright, no pushing. She looked into the hazel eyes again. “Afraid that we will get back and you will...” Deep breath. “Lie to me again.”

The blue earring spun lightly when Rachel took a step back. Chloe and her trust issues always required a lot of patience, but she used all of this precious reserve. Her annoyance, which appeared instead, could quickly escalate into a pure, raw rage. So many sacrifices, so many tears and confessions, and her pirate was still unsure, still doubting. Rachel deserved it, sure, but for fuck’s sake, how long would she be skeptical about her intentions? A month? A year? Forever?

“About what?” It wasn’t easy to stay calm, but she managed.

Her girl knew her too well though. It wouldn’t be hard to hide the flames of anger, even if Rachel was composed, unruffled and still speaking gently. Although a few more words, one more statement
and they would end up in a fight, a heated quarrel. On the other hand, perhaps it was needed.

“About anything.” Chloe shrugged. “Or just hide shit. I don’t deal with hidden shit very well. I know why you didn’t tell me about this whole thing, I get it, but I feel… Just not right, you know? It’s not even about him or what he did, or you did, it’s about those fucking secrets. I hate fucking secrets.” She rubbed her eyes slowly. Rachel had always been living up to the reputation of being mysterious and it was part of her charm, but in this case, it felt more like a curse. “It’s stupid. We went through it and I know everything now, but it doesn’t make me feel…” She cut herself off trying to finish with a helpless gesture.

“Sure?” Rachel apparently decided to serve as her English dictionary and was pretty good with it.

Chloe nodded.

“Yeah. I told you I’m terrible with trust and shit.” Her girl was holding onto the jacket’s collar, keeping her in place. The problem had to be solved here and now although the blue pirate wasn’t sure if it would go so smoothly. No chance to break free, damn it. No chance to run away and brush it off, leaving the whole thing up in the air.

“I know that.” Rachel wasn’t taking her eyes off her. The fire was still melting the hazel down and not in the nice way. “I married you being perfectly aware of it.”

Her blue treasure moved tensely. It was so easy to talk about the past, compared to expressing her worries about the future. She could feel Rachel’s irritation though and making her livid was the last thing on her list.

“Are you angry?” She asked, trying to cut the tense moment with a shy smile. Chloe Price didn’t mean any harm, she just wanted to talk, just a little bit, no biggie. It was Rachel’s fault though, she had been pushing for the words exchange, she made her get used to it.

Her girl backed off from the comforting warmth of the leather jacket. This weird mixture of tenderness and tension was a dangerous fuel to her own fire. Damn, she really wanted to explode, yell and scream finally, showing that it was devastating for her too, but suddenly felt exhausted and weak behind her flames.

“No, I’m done with anger.” She confessed, taking a few steps toward the edge of the steep downhill. Earthquakes were quite common in this area although Rachel hoped no shake would happen anytime soon. “The thing is I can’t do anything to convince you I’m honest, Chloe. I can assure you it was just a mistake, that I’m all yours but you will always suspect shit. You try to trust me, and I broke this trust so many times that I’m just stuck. We are stuck. I thought we fixed this and could move on, but now…” Her open arms outturned the grey vapor. “I don’t know what to do, Chloe. I really don’t.”

It was the pirate’s turn to follow her. Too much space was making her lonely and abandoned.

“Promise me. Please, promise me you’ll never do it again.” She begged to Rachel’s back, regretting even starting this discussion. On the other hand, Chloe was so understanding and supporting in the last few days, going through a lot in her own head. A simple closure, even if silly and redundant, was very much desired.

Rachel didn’t want to turn around, trying to control herself and not burst in anger. She had given herself absolutely already, her future, her heart and body included. She had to fight with herself, her parents and friends, abandoning her passions along with guilty pleasures, and crossing every thin red line to regain Chloe’s trust. Nothing worked though, and she was reminded of it by the person she loved the most on a daily basis. “Will you believe me?” She asked, with her hopes awfully low.
“Yes. I will.” Talking to the back of the thin, green jacket was making Chloe even more uneasy. “I just need to hear it.”

Rachel sighed, but not willing to take any chances, nodded slowly. Alright then. A promise. Perhaps it would work this time.

“I promise.” Smoking was really helping in moments of such affirmations. “Never again. I’ll never hide anything from you.” She felt Chloe’s hand on her shoulder. Her blue pirate was pushing her luck though, standing so close.

“Even if I ask?”

“Especially if you ask. I’m better with answering questions than random confessions. Although…” Rachel closed her eyes. How much would Chloe like to know? All of it? “…Some stuff might be harder for me to talk about than others. Some shit might take time.” She really hoped her blue trouble wouldn’t take it as a provocation. There were still some things unrevealed and Rachel would prefer to keep all of them hidden and intact.

Was it making her a liar?

“Yeah, I dig it.” Chloe nodded and tried to hold her hand again, succeeding this time. “Just tell me you need time, don’t make up a story.”

“Deal.” Promising anything had never been a big deal, but this time her chest got heavy, since she wanted to keep her word for real. Rachel smirked with a sigh of relief, killing the smoke between the scattered small rocks and rushed to the car, certain the conversation had ended. The outcome could be way worse, and she was hella glad they didn’t end up yelling at each other. Her blue treasure requested the truth, and honesty might be deadly fucking dangerous or shattering for both of them, however the questions were safe. Chloe would have to know what to ask and she would never…

“Did he hit you?” Her wife’s words froze her mid-step.

“What?”

“Did Bowers hit you?” The grey cloud covered Chloe’s face. “Did he beat you up?”

Rachel looked at the car, the rusty door not even a few feet away, then up at the sky with the clouds heavy and dark, swarming above, planning and plotting an attack with their thunders and raindrops ready. They would get back soaking wet if they keep talking. Chloe wanted to know? Fine. Whatever she needed.

A promise was a promise.

“Kinda.” The cut finger was still hurting. “He got hella crazy at the end, especially when drunk. A hammered Jekyll and drug-dealing Hyde. You put a bottle of booze in front of him and he would change into a violent fucking monster. It happened a few times, but it wasn’t as bad as you might think.” Frank played with her differently, more taming then threatening. With the blue pirate he just unleashed all of his anger at once. Two words, two exploits of temper. “Nothing really big or dangerous like he did to you,” she assured and turned back again not expecting any more questions. Please, no more questions.

Chloe didn’t move an inch, still playing with her smoke, scared by her own persistence.

“Did he ever…” Asking for it would be a one-way ticket. The answer, truthful or not, could burn some bridges, switch the current of their lives entirely. This question was on her mind for weeks if
not for months now, especially after she had read about Frank being violent. Chloe had to know.
“Did he ever force other things?”

Rachel’s shoulders rose in a sudden inhale, then dropped down in defeat of a breath out. The first reaction was to find her way out, create a false and nice explanation, but Chloe had read his files and God knew what he had noted there. Did she know the answer already? Was it the reason why Chloe had been so calm and thoughtful, feeling sorry for her? Did she play her just right to hear it in person? One way or another there was no escape. You promised, Amber. You promised, Price. You promised, just a few minutes ago.

“You really want to know?” She whispered, still not turning back. It felt wrong to look at her now, estimate the reaction, guess the potential outcome.

“Yes.” The response came quickly and without hesitation.

“Nothing left unspoken?”

“Nothing.” The blue pirate reminded, so determined and stubborn. She wanted to know, she had to, and no lie, even if convenient, would satisfy her this time.

One-way ticket indeed. Path of no return.

“Chloe... Jesus, fucking hell.” Her wife was just one breath away and a few feet too close, creating a safe, supposedly comfortable distance. Nothing was comfortable at the moment though, Chloe could save it for some other time. Fuck you, honesty. Fuck you, weird questions. Always so many questions. “It was this one time...” Rachel started almost recklessly and then gasped, getting dragged down hard in the black hole of her own twisted past. “We were both stoned and I wanted to finish the whole thing, break up, since I couldn’t stand it anymore, sober or not. He didn’t really like the idea and got pretty vicious. I said I felt so dirty with him and I just didn’t want that... stuff.” Dwelling on his requests was the last thing they both needed. “It made him angry, so he said that he’d make me feel really dirty to shut me the fuck up. And he did. And I did shut up hella fast. And then...” Her voice got so soft and dreamy, as if recalling a nice memory, not a nightmare. Self-preservation was a powerful custom. “It was the last fucking time I’ve seen him, Chloe. I walked straight home, and I’ve never looked back. It took me some time to put my shit together and talk to you though.” There was way more to the story though. The days of feeling so sick and deceived, betrayed and blaming herself, taking fix after fix and then arguing with her father, getting pulled into an unstoppable down spiral. Frank calling her, promising that he would change, he would never do it again, convincing that she wanted it as much as he did. Was it really forced? Could it be forced if it was her decision to be there and with him? She had created this moment, no one else was to blame, damn it. She had walked into this RV, she had sat on his lap, smoke a blunt, got a beer, take a fix. It was her, who kissed him that night, who flirted and lied to Chloe in a text message. It was his right, as he stated, but it wasn’t. Frank Bowers was just this sad, pathetic guy, who had saved her life and wanted to have some good time in return. It was her fault, but it wasn’t. It was. It wasn’t. Why did Chloe have to go there? Why?

Her blue treasure was listening with her eyes opened widely. The marks on her face faded into bleak white patches as she was growing pale with every word heard.

“Oh my fucking God.” She cried. “Oh God. I didn’t know.”

The distance grew bigger, even if neither of them took a single step, didn’t even move. It was disturbing but helpful at the same time. Rachel felt dirty again, like six months ago, unworthy and stupid, so being close to her treasure wasn’t fitting. Chloe was looking at her with terror, sensing how the weird tension changed its flavor, becoming lighter and yet heavier. They both weren’t sure
if it was a temporary or not. Rachel wasn’t even certain if she liked it.

“I didn’t want you to know.” What a nice surprise to still be equipped with a calm, serene voice. Was it this famous honesty factor? “Call me a liar if you want, but I didn’t want you to ever learn about this.”

Chloe completely forgot about her smoke, which turned into ashes, vanishing into pieces brushed by the sudden, sharp gusts of wind. All those months that she had been apprehensive about Rachel’s intents, suspecting some hidden agenda, not really believing in the rapid change, kicked the blue, blunt rebel in the guts, leaving her even more bruised. It had to be so hurtful for her girl, who had always been trying to make her feel safe, satisfied and happy, paying a high price for every single smile. Always in the middle, trying to control the world around, not letting Chloe to get hurt, always shielding, protecting and forgetting about herself. Forgetting totally. What had Rachel gotten in return? Doubts after doubts, breakdowns, questions and demands. Just stupid, dumb shit. Jesus Christ, she was so noble in her silence and kept her guard up high, even if there was no reason for it.

“Why?” The fingers tightened into a fist even if Chloe had no intention to get angry. “Sunshine, why?” The whisper reached the end of her breath.

Rachel looked at her, then at her shoes, then at Mount Hood, whitening the horizon. Mayhem was dressed up in the simple words and old, worn sneakers.

“You know why.” She tried to shrug, shrug everything off but it was too heavy, glued to her shoulders, covering her from head to toe. “You wouldn’t tell me either. It was just the most humiliating experience of my life. And...” The edge of the cliff was so close, cutting the grass from the sky in one strident line. Blue and green split. “I didn’t want to blackmail you with this...”

“Blackmail me!?” Chloe yelled, seriously furious and driven to the edge. “The fuck?” They danced for a moment, trapped between the road, the cliff’s edge and the parked truck. One step back, one forward, not shortening the distance, switching from calm to irate and back, exchanging moods like cards on a poker table. Up and down, just like the road from Portland to Arcadia Bay.

Rachel gasped on air, shook her head.

“How would it look like?” She spoke. “Oh Chloe, please, I know I cheated on you and lied to your face for months but since this guy did something fucking terrible, please take me back? You would, even if you didn’t want to, and I needed to know you wanted it as much as I did.” Sometimes telling the truth could equal the most vicious manipulation. One more reason why she had never wanted to tell her, although not the only one. “I didn’t want to trick you into it. I wanted it to be real and honest and special again.”

It wasn’t easy to drive Chloe up the wall, not in that desperate, helpless way like now. She wanted to yell, scream and break something, smash everything around, starting from Frank Bowers and ending with her own car. So many stupid mistakes, so many missteps, what she had done, what she hadn’t, how much she wanted to rewind time. Rachel was watching her with tensed curiosity, locking her own emotions down and feeling simply nothing, even if she wanted to shout too. The internal cry was buried so deep though, just like the rest of the horrors, so no one would ever hear it. No one would even know how deep it was hidden.

Unless she would be asked again. Please, no.

“It’s always been special and always will be!” The blue fury exploded, not able to control her own vehemence. It was so wrong on so many levels to get angry right now, just after being confronted with the revelation. She couldn’t help it though. “I would take you back because I love you! We
didn’t even break up! We were still together when you told me. You made a mistake, alright, but you got hurt too and I would forgive you for everything anyway!” She tried to hold her hand, but Rachel avoided the gesture swiftly.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, really.” Being rejected, even if in a minor way didn’t do Chloe good. “My trust radar might be fucked up, but I would always… always…” It was almost adorable how she stumbled over her own words. Angry fucking teddy bear, hopeless like a thrown-out toy. “…Take you back. And marry you. You are mine! Mine!” The hood of the car got hit loudly, marking Chloe’s hand with another bruise. “It wouldn’t change a thing!”

Her blond angel, her amazing, beautiful and wonderful girl, who was working her ass off to keep her away from this dangerous knowledge, shook her head again. Yet another scar, another bruise to the rich collection. Chloe Price was marking herself inside and out because of Rachel’s own faults. Her own errors had stopped to mark only her a long time ago, they were affecting everybody around, her blue rebel especially. It was safer to be hurt and silent, no one else would get damaged. It wasn’t her fault though, it was him. Those things didn’t happen to girls like her, did they? It was getting harder to control the world around and inside.

“It would, we both know it. Stop lying, Chloe. It doesn’t go well with your complexion. I just wanted to make it right, do one fucking thing right.” Giving her ground up was the only way to avoid crying. Rachel was tired of crying. She spread her arms widely. “So, now you know. You married a fuck-up, congrats.”

Her blue rebel scoffed, shocked by the statement. Rachel hurt. Rachel thinking so low of herself. Rachel being in danger for weeks and in pain for months with her girlfriend who was just whining and complaining about how terrible life had treated her. The stupid notes, all the photos and everything else could go to hell as far Chloe was concerned. Even whatever Frank had done wouldn’t make a difference. The context had changed, everything was different now, but one thing would always stay untouched.

“I married the most wonderful person on earth.” She just stated softly.

Her girl was close to tears, but the breakdown got defused by one painful spasm. Rachel laughed shortly, trying to vanish in a fake smile. Crazy, she was so close to going crazy, just like Max kneeling in the dust of the old, abandoned barn. Apparently, madness was caused by digging, literal or not, especially in their little closed circle.

“Yeah, where is she?” She sneered.

It stifled Chloe’s embers of rage in a second, leaving her even more scared.

“Rachel…” She whispered with her eyes wide open. “I don’t know what’s on your mind right now, but fuck me, if you blame yourself for that, you have to stop. Whatever happened…”

“I can’t talk about it anymore. I can’t get back to it or I’m gonna go fucking crazy!” At this point Rachel didn’t care if she would be called a liar, since the definition of this word got enormously blurry. All promises could go to hell, she was on the way there anyway, speeding up with every sentence spoken. Getting back to it was just too damn much and they hardly scratched the surface. Yes, there was more. Way more. Rachel could feel the nasty secrets waking up, recalling, gathering back to haunt her.

Chloe was grasping her hand tight though, not letting her to break free. Her knuckles were turning
white from the desperate hold.

“You don’t have to. You don’t. Rach... I get it.” Fuck, everything was making sense now. The drugs, the reckless partying, the conflicted signals, the control over every aspect of their life, the fallout. Talking about the future changed into mangling old wounds again. Chloe decided bravely that this whole distance thing wasn’t working anymore so just dragged Rachel closer and hugged tightly. She kissed her head, her forehead, trying to cover her with herself, protect, keeping safe, this time for real. “Rach, you know it’s not what I meant about secrets, right? You know that, right?” Thinking of how far she was pushing her, how many demands she had made, Chloe almost wept and then yet another thing slapped her in the face. “Are you... ok? I didn’t do anything that would remind you of it, right? I was never too hard, especially like... at the motel and stuff?” Rachel pleaded her not to be too wild, right? Did she force something too?

“No.” She heard a weak laugh, covered by the leather jacket, between the blue chest and the sound of the rapid heartbeat. Rachel was glad to get back to more earthbound issues though. This time it was easy not to lie. If Chloe carried any worries in the intimacy department, they all could be erased easily. “Of course not. On the contrary, as you noticed several hours ago. If I didn’t want something, I would tell you. And I want you in any way possible, you dumbass.” She grabbed her belt and pushed her hips closer. No special care in that field for sure. “The thing that happened... Chloe, you have to remember, I was fucking stoned and it wasn’t…”

“...As bad as I might think. I get it. I get it now.” The blue rebel kissed the blond hair dumbfounded, guilty, grateful and still hella angry. “He has to pay for it. He has to fucking pay!” Instead of hitting something and breaking her wrist in the process she just held her firmer. One sob, two. No, she couldn’t cry now. It wasn’t her turn, she wasn’t the victim here, but a fucking useless, clueless fucking observant. “He... has to pay…” Chloe murmured feeling Rachel rocking them both slowly. “I need him to…”

They were standing there for a long while, both fighting with tears and overpowering helplessness. Naked and exposed to each other in the gloomy mountain morning, somewhere in between the roads, words and time, they both knew there was no quick solution, no shortcut or secret way out. They got lost on who was comforting who, who was the stronger one, who had to be taken care of, enduring and learning to be patient. Human frailty at its finest, damn it.

“Chloe?” Rachel’s whisper took her by surprise, like a voice from the other world. “I need you to promise me something too.”

The blue worry narrowed her eyes. “Don’t tell me you’re gonna protect him now.”

“For fuck’s sake, I ain’t gonna protect him!” The hazel burned with fire again. Rachel’s breath was short and heated. “I don’t give a flying fuck about Bowers, really. I only care about you. You have to promise me that you’ll always think about us and all the consequences before doing anything. I need you by my side, here, with me, not in a fucking county jail. I don’t want to be afraid that you would do something stupid and leave me alone!” Don’t cry, don’t cry. Too late.

Chloe had gotten an extensive training of taking care of her tears and knew how to use her tenderness to calm her down slowly. A touch to her cheek, a smile, brushing the salty drops off and it was fixed. She knew her wife too well.

“Something stupid, huh? Don’t worry. I won’t.” She tried to kiss her lips, but Rachel avoided the caress yet again acting like a scared little animal in the dark forest, waiting for the storm to come. Chloe was no storm though. She was the clear, bright blue sky. “You’re not alone. Not with this or with anything else. No one’s ever gonna hurt you. No one! Not as long as I’m with you and I’m gonna be here for a very, very long time. You are not getting rid of me that easily.” She held
Rachel’s chin up to look into her eyes. They both got affected by this one confession, they had been affected a long time before it was worded but, in the end, it didn’t matter. Marriage was supposed to transform them into responsible adults, so here they were. Chloe had to take over now and it wasn’t as uncomfortable as she had expected.

“Promise?” A soft murmur touched the leather jacket.

“Promise.” The pirate nodded and kissed her gently, careful and patient. Rachel didn’t want to respond at first but gave up when her addiction won over her fear. The mountain air changed its density, letting them to finally fix one or two broken strings of connection, rebuilding it stronger.

Suddenly Chloe howled. In one second, she was smiling kindly, the next she almost broke her hand again, hitting the side of her old truck. Everybody had two faces, she was no exception. “He hurt my woman!” She yelled. “He hurt you. You!”

Rachel sighed deeply.

“He hurt my woman too and I have to live with it somehow.” She wanted to burn this dickhead alive so badly but couldn’t share her wish. It would be a mighty fuel to her girl’s rage, the hopeless, desperate rage she understood so well. “Don’t you play wild, wild west, Chloe. It’s not a pirate movie or a superhero fantasy.” Somebody had to be responsible in this madness, take control and put them back on the right track.

“I’m not five, Rach.” Chloe winced, calming down as abruptly as she exploded. She found another cigarette, lit up, smoked, shrugged. No more earthquakes were planned anytime soon.

There was one thing that didn’t add up, one piece that didn’t fit the story. She was certain that Rachel was damn honest, but there was something more to it. Something way darker, viscous and way bleaker. “Why did you feel sorry for him? After everything he’s done?”

No embrace, tight or not, would stop Rachel from stepping away now, bursting back. Chloe almost burnt herself with her cig, surprised by the blond storm.

“Because I’m a fuck up! Because I’m totally messed up! I don’t know!” Her angel yelled and then ran fingers through her hair, noticing how close the edge of the cliff was. Jesus, Chloe wanted to dig deeper. Fuck no. Not today. “There are things in my head that are hard to explain, and I really don’t want to come back to it and dig it out to know the answer! It’s stupid and complicated and I just fucking can’t!” The blue earring circled widely in a twisted warning.

The mountains repeated her last word, multiplied it, misshapen, hitting her back with the hollow echo. Rachel leaned over the truck, shaking. The old hood whined, bending under her touch and the highland resonance. The hills had been repeating her words, as everything was being reiterated.

“Alright. It’s fine. It’s fine, sunshine.” Chloe got pushed away but was far away from giving up. “We’ll work it out.” Pushed again, then pulled closer. Rachel Price, you conflicted creature. “You and me. We don’t have to get back to it if you don’t want to. Really. Hey, c’mon. Come here. Please. Please.” It was a struggle to hold her close, to kiss her again but Chloe succeeded even if it took a lot of effort. Rachel wanted to break free, tell her to fuck off, but got tamed instead with tenderness and care. “I love you, sunshine. No pressure, alright? Don’t worry.” She didn’t expect that confession, that kind of wild reaction but deep-down Chloe had known for months that something was off. It was way more convenient to cover it with her own insecurities and blame the unfair world instead. Holding her, the blue pirate promised herself to defend her, do everything right, but would she be able to? She had to protect Rachel from herself, from the wild fire, the crazy lion that could break free in every moment, still hiding in the golden cave of a fake confidence.
Ah damn, her girl was shaking. The chivalrous gesture of wrapping Rachel in her own jacket seemed silly, but Chloe didn’t have anything else to cover her with. Only this rugged, cut leather coat, dirty as sin and reeking with smoke.

“So, is this confession time working both ways or am I just the one interrogated here?” Rachel surprised her with another sharp question. Some kind of retaliation was needed, she wouldn’t be able to survive being the only one questioned.

“Both ways.” It was good to keep her close to her chest. “Always.”

“Very well.” This leather jacket was way too warm and too big for her. “What was this drinking thing that Max mentioned?”

“Oh, fuck.” The blue pirate growled. She knew Rachel would ask about it one day even if it was so not important comparing to the horrors her girl went through. However, honesty was a two-sided coin. Chloe Price didn’t have a choice but to find the most sincere explanation and pay back, pass it over. “I don’t do very well without you, Rach. I just stopped being a person, you know? I was fucking lost. It was so easy to get lost without you. The only thing I could think of was how to get another drink and how to get high as a kite. I was like, fuck my life, nothing else mattered. It was so pathetic. My girlfriend didn’t pick up the phone, let’s get hammered. Great idea, huh?” She laughed, immune to the late October cold. “The worse things between us became the more I drank, and then I got more scared you would leave me for sure, because I was a drunk, so it was a reason to get another shot and... I felt like you were slowly… Forgetting about me. So, I just wanted to forget about myself too.” She took a drag of smoke and watched it disappearing above their heads.

“Forgetting? I would never forget about you, Chloe. I’ve always been thinking about you. You have no fucking idea.” Rachel started to play with the bullet necklace, now uncovered and sparkling in the sun. Her girl had been so close to hitting herself with another ammo, just because she had been lonely and lost. Yet another blame to take. “Are you fine with booze around you now?”

“I’m not fine without you around me.” It was the most sincere statement Chloe could think of. To hell with this mushy shit though, Rachel asked about booze not about her feelings. “I’m ok with beer and some drinks. I’m careful. I know I should’ve told you, but you would start asking questions and drag everything out and I didn’t want to tell you because of the pressure or whatever the fuck.” A deep breath helped to finish the sentence. Damn, it was freezing. “Blackmail, as my wife would say. I beat this thing, I kicked it right in the dick and I’ve never looked back though. I’m fine. Alright, I party sometimes, but it’s different. I have somebody to come back to, you to keep me together, we have a life, a future, so I’m not so savage.” To be honest she tested her boundaries here and there, letting herself go once in a while. Those kids in Blackwell were always up to no good and Chloe liked being a reckless high school idol. Now, getting back home wasted had a different taste, different meaning.

Frank had been wasted too, when he did what he did.

Rachel was pondering for a longer while, although her thoughts went into a different direction, recalling her own homemade rehab, provided by Chloe along with her family. She had all the help then, all the support relying on the whole group of people, aware of her weakness and determined to fix her for good. Chloe had to beat it alone, in silence, locked in between the four walls of her room and not sure about her future.

“But if something happened, you would get back to it.” It wasn’t a question but a simple statement. Chloe rolled her eyes, guilty as charged.

“Can’t promise you I wouldn’t. That’s a fucking pressure, huh?” She pressed her to the car’s side,
not even leaning for a kiss yet. Rachel decided it would be served anyway. They were in this
together, one way or another.

“Fuck pressure.” She sniffed feeling the first drops of rain. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She expected to hear another ‘oh really?’ or similar doubtful reaction, as always when she was
saying something similar, but something had changed for good this time. Some gate got open and the
blue eyes sparkled in a different frequency than before.

“I know.” Chloe smiled boldly. “Me neither.”

The day got warmer again, despite the rain.

They got back to the car, ready to come back home for real. Chloe almost sat on the rose and cursed
loudly, afraid to squeeze its beauty or damage it. Rachel giggled, saving the metal flower and putting
in on the dashboard, not keen on playing with it again. The thorns had really sharp thorns and neither
of them needed more cuts, today or never. The rain intensified and spiced the moment with a
thunderstorm. Good that it happened now, not a few moments ago. Desperate talks were cheesy
when proceeded during the tempests.

Chloe didn’t give a shit about the weather, focusing on her truck yet again. The engine decided to
take a long break, maybe even a vacation and remained indifferent to all her efforts. One turn,
nothing, yet another, nothing. The rose shook a little on the sticky dashboard.

“Oh, great.” Chloe tried one more time and gave up raising her hands. “Now this thing doesn’t want
to start.”

“We’re stuck, huh?” Rachel smiled, not really bothered by the delay. They would get home, sooner
or later, it didn’t matter what obstacles they would have to defeat. The raindrops were drumming on
the car’s rusted body in a calm, sleepy peace, loud but conforming.

The blue mechanic, so unsatisfied and disappointed with her own favorite vehicle, surrendering to
the moment. They would have to tow this thing, no shortcuts this time, but she couldn’t get mad at
engine problems. There was something way more absorbing.

“The best stuck in the world.” Chloe said and kissed her one more time.

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Joyce Madsen felt uneasy. It wouldn’t be rude not to drive to Portland to pick up Rachel’s parents,
even if her and David barely knew those people. She wished Max Caulfield would go with them, but
on the other hand it could be even more problematic. James Amber didn’t say much or didn’t even
ask questions about his daughter, which she found odd. Rose was trying to keep the conversation
going, but except Oregon storms and California beaches they didn’t have any more safe topics to
discuss, so she gave up with the small-talk altogether. The 2-hour long drive was filled with silence
and anticipation, and even if they had to meet because of their children, no fear or assumption was
shared. Joyce offered them to stay at their house, but the Ambers rejected the offer politely, excusing
themselves with a hotel room already booked. It was a relief for everybody that they had it covered.

When they parked in front of the house, Joyce sighed deeply knowing that as soon as they walked
in, they would have to start talking about Rachel and Chloe. She was worrying about her only child
and couldn’t sleep the past few nights, thinking about what her daughter was up to, but was still hoping no special intervention would be needed. James and Rose were sharing a similar assumption and apparently wouldn’t even come here if it wasn’t for some suspicious activity they had noticed on the credit card. Brought together by the common friend of their children, all four of them felt forced to interact and wished it wouldn’t last long. Joyce, even though hospitality and courtesy were in her nature, tried to do her best, but her social skills were failing her badly. She really hoped that the apple pie she had prepared would break the ice and a family meal would make the atmosphere less tense. If not, the whole Saturday afternoon would be worse than a nightmare.

When they walked into the house, a lot of problems got solved immediately. Joyce, seeing her daughter nonchalantly leaning over the backdoor’s frame, breathed out deeply with a huge respite. Thank God, nothing happened, they came back after all and even if the hell of questions and accusations would start in a minute it was the best moment of the whole day so far. Rachel was home too, hugging her girlfriend, smiling and whispering something in her ear. Chloe laughed quietly and brought her closer, not shying over the intimacy level they had both been sharing. Dear lord, Joyce really hoped they wouldn’t act on it more, making the situation even more awkward. The girls were so absorbed by each other they didn’t hear them entering the living room. Chloe’s mother got used to seeing them together, but observed James Amber getting edgy, as anger and irritation were taking over him even more. It was hard not to notice that Rachel’s father didn’t approve of his daughter’s choices, her partner in life included.

“Oh, there you are!” She decided to step up first, subconsciously trying to delay his reaction, probably way harsher than hers. “Chloe, we’ve been worried! Where have you been? What happened to your face? Have you been beaten? Is everything alright?” Her daughter smiled shyly but was still holding Rachel’s hand in a desperate manner. Usually she would escape any kind of tender touch, but this time she didn’t mind much that Joyce was checking on the bruises and scars on her face.

“Long story, mom.” She murmured after the examination ended. All the souvenirs Frank Bowers left her were slowly fading away anyway. Chloe was quite happy her mother hadn’t seen her four days ago. “I’m fine. We’re fine.” She squeezed her girlfriend’s hand yet again.

Joyce frowned. That was new. Usually the girls parted quickly when watched by other members of the family, keeping all the loving touches and kisses behind the door of Chloe’s room. No one doubted what was going on between them, they had made it pretty obvious anyway, but now they really tried to manifest something. She wasn’t sure what, but suspected it was caused by Rachel’s parents presence.

“Rachel Dawn Amber!” James Amber didn’t make them wait long for his fierce response, raising his voice in a scolding manner. “You should explain yourself! You both skipped school and got everybody worried! There is already one girl missing and…”

“It’s not Amber anymore…” Rachel cut him off sneaking into Chloe’s arms.

Both families watched them speechless for a long while. Rose covered her mouth in a theatrical gesture. David rose his eyebrow. Joyce frowned again not sure what Rachel was referring to. James’s face grew pale, then flustered in a reddish flood of anger.

“What have you done?” He almost yelled but restrained himself in the last moment. Joyce was quite sure he would give his daughter hell and to be honest she wouldn’t mind a profound explanation. All of them were worried and this Amber thing was more than concerning. Rachel changed her name? How? What for?

And why the hell had Chloe gotten beaten in the process?
“We got married.” Her daughter answered calmly, but with a tad of challenge. She obviously wasn’t smitten by James’s attitude and was ready to protect her girlfriend against any form of argument, parental or not. “On Wednesday.” She shrugged like it was the most natural thing on earth and they were getting married every other week.

The silence and anticipation for explanation intensified. If Chloe expected them to burst in a cheerful chatter she had to be very much disappointed. Rose blinked and shook her head. David almost laughed. Joyce had to act fast or somebody would throw a tantrum here.

“Maybe somebody should make a tea.” She wiped her hands in the kitchen towel walking behind the counter. A glass of a good moonshine would do way better though, but she wasn’t sure if the Ambers were used to alcohol, that kind especially.

“Maybe somebody should explain themselves.” James winced.

Rachel opened her mouth ready to confront him, but her blue treasure was faster again. She knew how fierce their battles were and her parents wouldn’t be amused by flying things and broken glasses. Somebody had to be responsible, right? Somebody had to face this rich, powerful asshole. He had no control over her girl now, he could suck her dick.

“There is nothing to explain, Mr. Amber.” Chloe took a step forward. “We decided to get married and we did.” There was way more to the story, her bruises included, but they would decide how much to reveal, not him. His reign had ended, Rachel didn’t owe him a thing and the last thing her amazing girl needed after this heartbreaking talk at the cliff was her own father yelling and complaining.

Whining dickhead.

“I warned you both not to do anything stupid!” Of course, he had to yell. Great. Chloe’s fingers tightened into fists. She noticed that David straightened up, peering at James, ready to interfere if needed. No funny business in his home, his castle his rules. At least somebody was agreeing with her.

“James, please.” Rose decided to speak up, but it only made everything worse. James Amber, used to the full support of his own family, turned to his wife surprised and angry.

It was Rachel’s turn to move forward, always triggered by her father taking his anger over Rose and now Chloe. It was her fight after all, her decision and her family. Still wearing the leather jacket a few sizes too big, she looked smaller than ever before, but no one was deceived by how dangerous and fierce the blond flame could really be.

“It wasn’t stupid and don’t talk to… my wife like that!” She snapped.

The term ‘wife’ took them even more by surprise than the announcement about the marriage. James blinked, not sure how to react and how to win this battle. His heart was pounding loudly, it was getting harder to breathe, to inhale. Were they joking? Was it a prank?

“I think I need to sit down.” He said only, grabbing a chair from the kitchen table.

“I think I need to sit down too.” David followed him, also shocked. He had never expected Rachel calling his step-daughter like that, even if they had discussed that outcome once or twice before. The small commotion forced Joyce to finally put the kettle on and start preparing some kind of meal. Judging from experience, people were way less hasty when something really tasty was served and she was ready to charm all of them with her cooking. The news still didn’t hit her fully and Joyce
Madsen wasn’t sure what to think about this awkward declaration. She looked at David, but he only shrugged, being as lost as her.

“Why now?” James Amber loosened his tie, making himself comfortable on the old, wooden chair. The table squeaked when he leaned over it. “Why didn’t you wait till you graduate?”

“Why would we wait?” Rachel replied at once, with her head up and challenge in the hazel eyes. Rose and Joyce sighed in unison, sensing a huge fight incoming. Apparently those two could argue everywhere, even under a welcoming roof and in front of others. Chloe’s girlfriend was really pushing for the confrontation not holding back.

Well, not girlfriend. Wife. Oh, dear lord. Wife. They were all family now.

“It just felt like the right thing to do.” Chloe frantically tried to stop the killing spree before it started. It really felt like an exam, a final test drive, and she really didn’t want to crash on the first turn taken, especially with her girl being a passenger. “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you guys, but we wanted to just to be...” The hand on Rachel’s shoulder truly had a magical effect. The blue pirate didn’t want to start any more wars, even if this one had been going on for years.

“…Only the two of us.” Rachel added, and they both got back to looking into each other’s eyes, ignoring the rest of the gathering.

“I think I still have some of this apple pie somewhere.” Joyce sighed and opened the fridge. To her surprise, Rose rushed to the kitchen ready to assist as much as she could.

“Can I help you with anything, Mrs. Madsen?”

“It’s Joyce.” Chloe’s mother nodded and passed her the plates and utensils, sensing the girls wouldn’t be keen on setting the table. “I guess we are… related now.”

“Rose. I guess we are.” Rachel’s mother replied, watching the girls with a smile. It was a pleased smirk, but was disturbed by worries and concerns, a nervous trip to Arcadia and all the hell at home she was expecting to happen. James Amber wouldn’t let it go so easily, she was certain of it.

Chloe kissed Rachel’s forehead, trembling a little, not used to being so affectionate in front of their family. It would require some practice to be fully relaxed in moments like this and training those skills didn’t seem necessary. She looked at her mother, bustling in the kitchen, but Joyce was too busy and probably also distressed to catch her sigh. David was more responsive, smiling back. Astonishingly, it was the moustache who was the only one acting like a human being. It was good to have an ally, just in case she would really have to kick James Amber’s ass.

Why the hell had they even come here?

“Alright, can you just tell us what this is about?” Rachel’s dad was the first to break the silence, even if the stiffness hadn’t vaporized and the atmosphere was still heavy. “Is this real? You got married?”

“Three days ago, in Portland.” Chloe nodded before her wife was able to start yet another fight. This marriage thing was hella tricky. “Here’s the certificate, by the way. I hope it helps.” She passed him the folded paper, still being held by Rachel, who really didn’t want to let her go even for a second. Damn, her girl was really nervous, and trying to cover it up with a bursting anger. Nothing new, but Chloe Price really wanted to calm everybody the fuck down.

James Amber was studying the piece of paper for a long while. His heart was working abnormally fast, choking him and stifling every attempt of a deep breath. It was hard for him to focus, and now his vision became blurry when he was examining the certificate intensely, one line in particular.
“You… changed your name.” He croaked, not believing his own eyes.

“I told you I did.” Rachel shrugged, far away from being composed. Struggling between ignoring her father’s anger and fueling it more, she decided to hide herself in Chloe’s arms.

“You changed your name?” Rose repeated, almost dropping the plates.

Apparently, Rachel not being Amber anymore was more concerning than them being married. Chloe decided to take over, in a blunt and straightforward way, kicking her anxiety down and avoiding David’s questioning look. Her mother stopped cutting the pie as well, frozen by the news. The whole family acted like clockwork toys, either talking at the same time and walking swiftly, or turning off every sound and move.

“Is everybody deaf today?” She scoffed losing her patience. “Yes, she did.” Chloe looked at the Ambers. “She did.” And then at her own parents. “She’s Rachel Price now.”

James threw the certificate on the table and leaned back in his chair. One piece of paper causing so much troubles. He was a lawyer though, knowing how much an official document could change an everyday life. His own favorite weapon was used against him now, and he could swear it was done on purpose.

“I can’t believe it.” He merely said.

“People change names when they get married.” David tried to help. “Usually. Sometimes.” Even if hesitant he was clearly stating his ground, having his step-daughter back. This conceited, rich bastard wouldn’t stand a chance in a regular fight and was trying to boss everybody around. What the youngsters had done was reckless and irresponsible, but it wasn’t the right time for a quarrel.

The apple pie smelled amazing too.

“You knew that this day would come, dad.” Sensing the support, Rachel calmed down. It wasn’t just two of them against the world. Good. “One day and I wouldn’t be Amber anymore.”

Her father nodded unhurriedly and then got up slowly. His heart’s pace was making him dizzy, fingers were trembling lightly, breath was short and rapid. It wasn’t wise to continue this argument, among people who he barely knew and trusted. Even his own wife supported this crazy idea, quite content with the conclusion. James Amber could feel that both families wanted to start celebrating and ask more cheerful questions instead of scolding. Very well then, he would give them what they wanted and draw the consequences later.

“Chloe Price.” He took a few steps to the blue-haired girl, not even trying to smile or look friendly.

“Mr. Amber.” It took all of Chloe’s courage to face him. She cleared her throat, finally releasing her hand from Rachel’s grasp. “James.”

He didn’t even blink at Chloe calling him by name. An adorable attempt and he would gladly lead her out of error, explaining why they would never be related. This battle was lost though, and he had to play it right, to gain the advantage for the future clashes. James Amber was planning this long term, aware that no yelling or threatening would make him victorious here and now.

“I wasn’t a big supporter of your relationship with my daughter, but I have to accept her choice. I hope you will take care of her as much as she takes care of you.” Chloe almost got a heart attack when he shook her hand.

“Thank you.” She swallowed hard looking at Rachel and James, then back at her wife. “I will take
care of her.”

“She will.” James got assured by his own daughter. “She does.”

David looked at Rachel unsure if he should do a similar thing, make a statement, give a speech or something. It was so complicated. What was the custom here, what was his obligation? Rachel looked at him, grinning and waiting for a similar question, but David just shook his head, got up, took her hand, dragging her out of Chloe’s arms and simply hugged. It would be risky to confront this blonde girl with any kind of awkward declaration, she would make him nervous. He was never great with discourses anyway.

Next one in line to be squeezed was Chloe. Ah, what the hell, since it was national hugging day, she could do that, right? And he didn’t give Rachel shit either. Damn mustache hugged her for real. And she hugged him back, what a fucking love fest.

She needed a smoke.

“This pie would have to serve as your wedding cake then. I’m sorry I didn’t prepare anything…” She heard Joyce’s voice and noticed that the dessert was already on the table. Even James Amber was charmed by her mother’s baking wonders.

“It perfect Joyce, thank you so much.” He answered gently and tried to smile. Yeah, try to behave, you bastard. At least try.

“Our wedding cake was a pack of pop-tarts actually.” His daughter laughed and winked at Chloe. Damn right, they didn’t treat themselves with anything special, not when it came to cakes and sweets though. The blue pirate remembered the flavor of the other treatments very well, but it was weird to recall them in the middle of a family reunion.

“Rachel, you didn’t even think about a cake?” Rose looked at them shocked yet again and frowned when her daughter just shrugged lightly. Having a proper wedding festivity didn’t even cross her mind. On the other hand, they had celebrated it in a pretty decent way, no cakes included.

“I had more important things to… do.”

Chloe could easily murder both families, wait, the whole family, damn it was convoluted, when they shared this knowing smirk, reading the hidden message behind the innocent declaration. This ceiling really could use a repaint, she decided, avoiding anybody’s sight and studying the dark cracks on the white surface. Maybe she could ask David and they would fix a few things around the house or something. The walls were also way more interesting than the human faces. Holy shit, she didn’t know what to do, but then Rachel, somebody who she was supposed to call wife from now on, came to her, embraced and kissed properly. Not in a passionate way, but properly, showing all her hopes and dedication. It was slow, with a smile against her trembling lips, with a little bit of sneaky tongue to spice it up and in front of everybody else. After they parted Rachel looked at her with such love that no one could even question how serious they were. If that was the price to get married in secret, Chloe wouldn’t mind paying it as often as required.

Both families were watching them speechless, shocked and captivated at the same time. They all had known for years but had never witnessed anything so clear and revealing before. Somehow, just because of this one long kiss, they understood them more and some questions met answers way faster.

Rachel, suddenly shy and awkward, broke the eye contact and buried her face in her shirt, drowning in Chloe’s smell and the well-known warmth. One small kiss became a huge deal, a huge act of
courage, a final big jump. It felt right to do it, instead of explaining and yelling. It felt right to just show them, even if her mother almost choked on the apple pie. She felt the protective arms around her though, as she was protecting too, always and forever.

“My wife.” Rachel whispered, and that made Chloe Price goddamn happy.

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James Amber, tired of the women’s chatter, excused himself, and when no one paid much attention, snuck out to the garage, far away from the uncomfortable uproar. His heart was beating really fast, sometimes slowing down and then speeding up again, and he had to take off his tie completely since even feeling any kind of band surrounding his neck was making every breath even heavier. The cheerful and careless statement about the marriage affected him more than he had expected, and even putting on an act of a forgiving and lenient father equaled suffering. Chloe Price, the last person he had assumed to welcome in his family, wedded his daughter and pretended it was an entirely natural turn of the events. She was strong enough to play this game, he was too weak and too tired to keep up with it. His cheeks became flustered with a dark, dangerous red when he recalled the credit card statement that forced them both to fly back to Arcadia. The Rachel he had known for years and trusted, would never have made such a purchase, aware of the fact of who was responsible for her expenses. Damn kids, growing so fast and being so reckless. So damn reckless.

He frowned noticing David Madsen, who also ran away from the living room and now leaning over one of his muscle cars was slowly sipping cheap beer enjoying the last bits of a dying sun. This guy had always been making him uneasy, but James Amber preferred his company than the annoying female crowd inside. He didn’t know much about Chloe’s stepfather, except a few basic facts that Rachel shared once or twice. An ex-military, employed by Blackwell as a security guard, strict and sometimes abusive, this man was part of his relatives and his family.

Family. What a scary thought.

“Wanna beer?” David offered him a bottle, and seeing a short nod, he cracked it open.

“Sure,” said James Amber, and sat on the hood by his side, enjoying the sunset along with the beverage. Rose was very strict lately about any kind of alcohol at home, explaining how badly it would affect his blood pressure and make his heart problems worse. This time she couldn’t scold him not being around and James Amber deserved a drink. Treating himself with a beer was more into his taste than showing photos and gossiping by an apple pie, quite delicious to be perfectly honest.

Married. Rachel got married. She had vanished without a word and came back with a certificate and a wife, with her last name changed. His daughter didn’t care enough to even make a phone call, to inform them both about such a decision. Both families were slapped in the face with the news and expected to cheerfully approve. People who had never even interacted, didn’t share the same core values and material status were forced to face this issue together and bond over it, with a snap of the fingers. The Madsens had been taking care of his daughter, true, but now he couldn’t find a single scrap of gratitude for what they had done. James Amber felt robbed blind, after trusting in them all with Rachel’s well-being and now left empty-handed with her taken away in yet another way. How was he supposed to find himself in this situation? How was he supposed to react? James Amber knew this marriage tomfoolery wouldn’t last long though, or so he hoped.
The neighborhood, bathing in the red and golden light of the sunset, looked nice, but poor. There was something off about those steep streets and cookie-cutter houses. Yet Rachel preferred to live here instead of the luxurious halls of the mansion in Long Beach. Interestingly heartbreaking. Even the inhabitants seemed abnormal and unfriendly. He could swear this one weird stranger in his dirty and rugged clothes was watching them closely while playing with his folding knife. The bearded face was covered in the shadow of a baseball cap, of course with the confederate flag at the front, but James Amber was sure he had seen this man before. Maybe in passing though, he had no connections in places like this, or perhaps it was one of the criminals that he had prosecuted years ago. His mind went to Sera and two more short sips were needed to erase her smiling face from his thoughts, at least for now. James Amber really hoped this hobo wasn’t connected to his ex-wife in any way. Any mention of her would be the last thing Rachel needed, especially after such a profound mistake she had made.

He noticed he had been quiet since the beer bottle was handed to him and felt even more uneasy. The silly commotion threw him out of balance, leaving him stripped from his social skills and making him forget about the manners. A small talk with another father, who was also kicked in the stomach with the shocking announcement shouldn’t be that bad though. James Amber took a long sip, ready to start a conversation about anything but marriage.

“We don’t have to talk.” David cut the silence with yet another sip.

“Certainly, we don’t have to.” James Amber responded, grateful for the small favors and prolonged calm moment. Perhaps at least one member of this family was able to understand him. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad. The beer started to taste better, and the day, even if done with the sunshine, got surprisingly warmer. Not everything was lost, not everything was that terrible.

The weird stranger adjusted his baseball cap, looked at them one more time and disappeared in the shadows of the nearby houses, hiding his folding knife into his jeans’ back pocket.

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They day was coming to its end finally, exchanging the sunrays for the front yard lamppost or rare garden torches. Joyce Madsen looked at her watch, one of the very first gifts from William, counting how much time she could spare before heading to work. She still remembered opening this present and gasping in awe, not sure if such a young couple as they should waste money on expensive toys. Her first husband had simply laughed, saying that nothing was too expensive for the love of his life and promised that the watch would work as long as they would be together. It was almost a blackmail, a cute, sweet corruption. This beautiful thing was still set and running like the very first day, even if William had left them both so early.

She looked at her daughter who had trouble to release Rachel’s hand from her grip, and letting her wife drive the Ambers back to the hotel. It was quite obvious why Chloe didn’t want to leave her alone with the demanding father, especially after the heated discussion and the groundbreaking news. Rachel insisted on spending some time alone with her family though, and even her newly wedded wife understood this constraint. Joyce smiled sadly, remembering how inseparable she and William had been, but some hardships required facing them alone. James Amber had to get used to the change, accept the situation, and Chloe’s presence wasn’t speeding up this process.

When they finally parted, and the two cars pulled off from the driveway, the blue devil turned around running to her mother, embarrassed a little but more willing to talk than ever before. Joyce looked at
her watch again and smoothed her apron. They didn’t have much time though; a quarter of an hour would have to suffice.

“My little daughter got married. Without me.” She embraced Chloe’s arm, when her panting daughter finished her jogging. They started walking slowly through the middle of the street not worrying about any cars passing.

“I’m sorry, mom. It was just…” Chloe blew out a single lock of blue hair covering her sight. “We can still celebrate later like with a party and stuff.” She was silent and polite, afraid of her mother’s reaction, knowing very well that this conversation would be way more honest than the comments and remarks shared by a slice of apple pie. This time it wasn’t a piece of cake, or so it seemed.

Joyce squeezed her arm in a reassuring manner. The words she wanted to share weren’t hurtful or harsh, not even marked by a disapproval, but since the girls made such a profound decision it was her obligation to step in and discuss a thing or two. Calmly.

“Chloe…” She sighed, knowing that sugarcoating would never work and make her daughter even more suspicious. It was better to cut to the chase instead. “I know you both love each other. I don’t question Rachel’s dedication… But did you do it because of the right reasons?”

Surprisingly, her blue child pondered, instead of giving her a hasty and neglectful answer. Every discussion about Rachel she had always been seeing as a challenge, a battle to win or a land to conquer. Now there was nothing to rebel against anymore, the vows were exchanged, the papers remined signed. Chloe really wanted to be frank with her mother. It was about time.

“Yeah. I think so. To finally start our life together. Officially. I mean… I really…” She took a deep breath, almost stumbling over her steps, losing the peaceful pace. “I love her, mom.”

It wasn’t easy to talk about her feelings, she hadn’t done it for years now, expressing only anger and demands, but it would be damn unfair not to say it. Rachel was forced to do a similar confession months ago, and Chloe had never had the courage to do so. She couldn’t stand the thought of being this little coward, eating her cake and having it too, balancing between the obvious gestures and the truth unspoken.

Joyce just nodded, not really surprised, but content it had been said.

“Yes. Since when?” She let herself to ask as her curiosity won the skirmish, staying unruffled. Maybe it was her own challenge, her own dare, to finally learn the truth about those two, now becoming a family. Joyce Madsen liked challenges no less than her daughter.

She thought that Chloe would brush it off, say something silly, but she just held her closer not tripping in her steps. They didn’t have to hide anything anymore; no secrets were needed. Why not share some facts about events that had made her happy?

“When Rachel and I started… to be with each other?” Chloe hated the term ‘dating’ with a passion. It always made her feel like the relationship wasn’t serious, reminding her of all those cheerleaders who were dating a different jerk every Sunday. The fact that she had just married one didn’t really cross her mind. “Three… Eh… Almost four years.” Technically three and a half, but who would’ve counted? “Since I got expelled.” That’s a date her mother would certainly remember.

Joyce wasn’t stunned, betting it probably happened around that time, and even the Blackwell drama and lack of formal education didn’t bother her anymore. Chloe got back on track and they both knew who was the culprit responsible for it. Rachel got her expelled, true, but also dragged her back to the
school’s walls, even if it had taken her years.

“That’s what I thought.” Chloe saw her mother smiling and that gave her strength to give back the smirk. Wow, no shit was given. That was nice. “You two were almost joined at head, all the time. I suspected something was going on. Then I didn’t have to suspect.”

“So obvious, huh?” It was Chloe’s turn to put her curiosity in play. They had been hella careful, at least at the beginning, and she wanted to know what betrayed them actually. Was it the first sleepover? The time when Joyce got back home so early and met Rachel in the hallway, almost naked? A phone conversation overheard? The making-out session in front of the garage?

Joyce shook her head, reading the blue mind. Mothers always know, it was part of their job.

“It got pretty obvious when she moved in, but David and I thought that it was more than just girls having fun for some time before. No boyfriends, always together, always making common plans for the future…” Seeing the baffled gaze, she patted Chloe’s arm. “No, I didn’t say anything, and I tried to be respectful. You will understand one day... if you decide to have kids.”

Mentioning reproduction and small screaming humans made her daughter stiff for half a minute. Rachel stated something as well and to be honest it was the last thing Chloe Price ever wanted or planned. She really didn’t want to discuss any chances for providing grandkids, now or never to be exact, so she just moved swiftly to another subject.

“Thank you, mom. I… I know it was a trouble and everything and…” Apologizing wasn’t her forte for sure and it was so hard to explain. “I’m sorry you had to learn about it that way, it’s just…”

“I know.” Joyce nodded, stopping the stuttering river of the blue enlightenments. “What happened, Chloe? Did you get into a fight?” She touched her daughter’s face again, brushing the cut eyebrow and a yellow sign on her cheek.

“A little bit. Nothing serious. It wasn’t related to… You know… Marriage and stuff.” Chloe sniffed not running away and letting her mom to take a closer look. “Anyway, it won’t happen again, promise.” It wouldn’t happen exactly that way, so it wasn’t really a lie, right?

Right?

“Did you talk to Max?” Her mother disturbed the dark passage of thoughts about some RV owner and his little scribbles. “She was very concerned about you two disappearing.”

Max’s involvement with the family gathering and the hasty search for them was briefly discussed, but Chloe didn’t put much thought into it, assuming her childhood friend just freaked out a little. She really wanted to call her while in Portland, but something told her to wait and talk to her in person. Max Caufield deserved more than just a simple message. Her freckled first mate had no idea they had come back though, it would be nice to actually set up a meeting. Hopefully she wouldn’t be grumpy much.

“No, not yet. Damn… I will shoot her a text when we get back.” Chloe promised and then offered even more excuses. “We didn’t tell anybody. Like really anybody, mom.”

Joyce looked at her watch, trying to hide from her daughter how the time had sped up, forcing her to hurry. She really wanted to take her time with this talk, explain everything, suggest a few things before welcoming the customers of The Two Whales. Her shift would be a nightmare if she didn’t express herself properly today. It was important.

“It wasn’t very wise though.” A soft reprimand was followed by yet another pat to Chloe’s shoulder.
“You got a lot of people worried, me and David included. Rachel took your name.” She finished on a different note, surprising her daughter.

The whole talk was slowly getting Chloe baffled.

“Yeah, she did.” Despite of her nervousness, she had to smile. Damn, it was something Chloe was really proud of. “Are you fine with it?” She asked, not certain if they really should’ve asked before the decision was made and the deal sealed.

“I’m fine with it, Chloe, don’t you even worry. It was just quite unexpected…” Joyce paused, this time kindly requesting some more insights. She had also taken this last name, and then gave it up, marrying David. Her reasons were way more complicated and would be nice to know Rachel’s. If Chloe decided to share, of course.

Chloe decided. It wasn’t a problem, on the contrary.

“It was her choice. She wanted to honor my dad in that way.”

This statement made Joyce think. She suspected some dark family drama, a planned revenge taken on James Amber, even hiding from the dark past or something way more sinister. Rachel bringing some comfort to Chloe’s unhealed wound was a pleasant shocker. Joyce had never expected this girl to do such a thing.

“She really… cares for you a lot.”

“She does.” Chloe stopped and turned to her, grabbing her hands in a desperate plea. “Mom, I know that you didn’t really trust her and all but try. Please try.” The blue pirate knew how many reservations Joyce was holding against her girl and, even if polite and well-mannered, she was still suspicious. “Rach is good for me. She went through hell, changed a lot and loves me. She really does.”

How to explain to a nineteen-year-old what was troubling Joyce Madsen? Trust was a very extensive term and she believed Rachel, to some extent of course. This girl had proven many times how much she loved her daughter, not backing off even if uncomfortable. Love wasn’t everything though, it was just the beginning.

“Chloe, I know it’s not my business and you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but it seems that there were some dark times between you two.” She started carefully, hoping Chloe wouldn’t react badly or just brush off the topic. Believing it or not, her daughter, instead of frantically standing her ground, just bowed her head.

“You mean the drugs and… stuff? They were.” It was too evident to deny the facts and realities. “We almost broke up. Rachel… she got into trouble, got hurt and... yeah, it got complicated. We sorted things out, fixed and moved on.” She assured her mother along with herself, hoping they had really overcome those issues. Stupid Bowers was still out there, lurking between the shadows, but overall Chloe felt they both were reborn, had risen from the ashes and nothing in this world would embroil them again. Not much anyway.

They still would have to discuss this pineapple pizza thing though.

“I hope it’s in the past, but Chloe...” Joyce was stroking her arm, making sure that no explosion of angst mixed with anger would happen anytime soon. “Remember one thing. Marriage doesn’t solve your relationship problems, it adds more to it. Whatever dark clouds are between you, you still have to work it out. It might be even harder. When me and your father got married and I was already
pregnant I thought that this step would also solve all our issues.”

Chloe had been way too young to understand the challenges William and Joyce had to face. She remembered only the pleasant part of her childhood and cherished those memories as her biggest treasure. Her mother didn’t want to touch nor ruin them of course but keeping a marriage whole was a serious task, quite a toil. She would give everything to protect her daughter from the wild train of trials and errors, warning her through examples of her own mistakes and experiences, although it wasn’t easy without destroying a portrait of the perfect father Chloe kept in her mind.

“And it did, you were a perfect couple.” The blue concern proved her point in the same moment. William was perfect, full stop, they all had been perfect.

Joyce sighed deeply.

“Perfect couples don’t exist, Chloe. Your father was a good man and I loved him greatly, but we had to work on it hard and deal with a lot of problems.”

Her daughter shifted anxiously, battling with her own thoughts. Subconsciously she got back to some dreams and visions, experienced over three years ago. The William she remembered was a loving husband and a caring father, but the details were getting blurry with every month passing. Chloe had always had this weird tendency of memorizing only the most terrible and the most wonderful moments, erasing everything not that much impactful. Black, white and blue, that was how her world was rolling. In the greyness of the shadows she might miss something though, overlook some specifics.

“Did dad have a secret?” She asked and got concerned even more seeing Joyce’s face tensing.

More secrets? Please, no more secrets. She was terrible with secrets.

“What do you mean?” Joyce asked gently.

“Is there anything I should know about him?”

Joyce Madsen looked at her watch one more time, but the time wasn’t her bigger concern. The hands of the clock, even if merciless, were mocking them both with the sharp spikes of their angles. She had been thinking about William every single day, even with David by her side. Her first husband would always be part of her life, although her memory wasn’t as selective. The secrets wouldn’t help much though, they wouldn’t matter.

“No, Chloe.” She shook her head slowly heading back to the house. It was about time to head to work, start the busy night. “There is nothing more you have to know about him. Nothing.”

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We are fine, Maximus Prime.

One text message. No emoji. Max would cry seeing a smiley face, she would trash this damn mobile, throw it against the wall, squeeze it in her hand, making it unusable and useless. She almost read it aloud, and seeing an incoming call, clicked the red button to feed on the letters only. One careless text message after four whole days. One message after the whole fucking eternity.
Time slowed down again, sinking her in anger. They were just fucking assholes, stupid, reckless idiots who didn’t care, didn’t want to care. She went through hell and back, humiliating herself in front of her colleagues, begging Victoria, even Nathan or Wells for any clue, any hint or suggestion. Alarming the whole town, Max called the Ambers, Joyce, driving Steph crazy and they just came back, happy and cheerful, like nothing had happened.

Everything had happened.

Some fuckwit once said that life is what happens when you are busy making other plans. Her own existence just took a rapid turn leaving her alone in the fucking desert. So many hardships, hurdles, difficulties and worries, and Chloe didn’t have the decency to call her, to just politely say what she had been up to. Was she really a friend or was it just yet another stupid vision, her mind tricking her into a stupid belief that her childhood friend really cherished their bond. Maybe Max was just this annoying little fly, always around but never needed or liked. Maybe she was just an obstacle, an unwanted voice of supposed reason.

She read it one more time and deleted it with one single tap. Who the fuck cared? She had lost something so important to learn a well-known lesson. First save yourself, the world could wait and be just fine in the meantime.

Nothing was fine though. Nothing was left.

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“Congratulations, Rachel. My sweet, little baby got married. Nineteen and married already!” Rose felt obligated to hold her tightly one more time, far away from the eyes of others. The thought of them becoming one family with the Madsens still seemed abnormal and awkward, but not as disturbing anymore. She knew how to charm them and make a great impression, not failing this time either. Always open-minded and more than tolerant, Rose Amber found a common language with Joyce, bonding over their baking craft and other eatable wonders. Holding her daughter in her arms, she was still upset though, feeling omitted and neglected for not being informed in advance about the marriage being planned. Rachel, rebelling against her father, wouldn’t let him know for sure, but why didn’t she call her mother? Rose was aware of how to keep a secret. She had quite a practice in this matter.

“Better late than never. Thank you, mom.” Rachel didn’t want to let her go either. She had missed her like crazy. “Hey, don’t cry. It’s fine, we are fine, right?” They stayed hugged as her mom couldn’t stop the stream of her tears.

“It’s just so rapid. I have never expected you’d get married in secret.” Some tissues were provided, so Rose could finally wipe out her eyes trying to keep her makeup untouched. Rachel smiled hiding a tear or two herself. It was different with her parents only, way more personal.

“It’s because she’s read too much Shakespeare,” said James Amber, sitting on the hotel bed, unbuttoning his shirt and loosening his belt buckle. His breath was fast and shallow, he didn’t look
particularly good, but refused the given glass of water. Feeling neglected too, but by the lack of support by his own family, James was still holding a grudge against his daughter and wife. His pounding heart and rising blood pressure weren’t helping either.

“It’s never too much.” Rachel smiled and sat by the table, contemplating the layout of the hotel room and comparing it to one small hideout in Portland where she had spent a few days prior. Arcadia Bay didn’t offer many luxurious places to stay, but her parents managed to find the most tasteful and expensive chamber, always traveling with class and their pockets deep. Instead of one ugly deer, interesting pieces of modern art were decorating the walls, the furniture was made from real, heavy wood, and the carpet was probably way more comfortable than her own bed. Speaking of places to sleep, she noticed that James booked a two queen-size beds room, confirming her suspicions that Rose and he weren’t in the best terms at the moment, even if trying to prove her otherwise. It made Rachel a little bit sad but knowing how much they argued maybe it was for the best.

She really hoped she and Chloe would never end up in a similar situation.

“Apparently it is.” Her father disturbed her hotel’s inspection, finally prepared for a retaliation. In his opinion everybody was way too forgiving regarding the mistake those two made. It was time for an adult to talk some sense into those kids, his daughter specifically. “Do you know what your mother and I have gone through? How much we have been worried? You disappeared, neither of you picked up the phone, your friend even called me asking where you were!”

Rachel was well-prepared for the counterattack and wasn’t really bothered by his sudden outbreak. One thing was baffling though.

“My friend called you?” She frowned, taken by surprise, thinking of who was brave enough to type James Amber’s number and who the hell called themselves her friends now. Rachel didn’t have that many. Yet another sad observation, but some changes were planned in that matter too.

Her father threw his tie on the bed, unbuttoning his shirt even more. Oregon was way colder than California, especially in this time of the year, but he was acting like in a fever. Sustaining himself from talking through the whole ride to the hotel cost him a lot, and now finally free from keeping up with the perfect image, James Amber could drop his act, showing his real face. It wasn’t a nice view though, but not scary. Rachel was immune, set and ready. No fear.

“Why did you do it? To punish us? Punish me?”

Even if she was wondering how the conversation would start and go, even if prepared and armed with the golden chest of witty responses, Rachel didn’t take such a ridiculous accusation lightly. Her father always thought that everything was about him and him only. Marrying Chloe as a punishment? Good fucking joke.

There was a no-smoking policy in this hotel too. What a shame.

“You seriously think I got married because I wanted to take a revenge on you? Are you for real?” Keeping herself calm didn’t go well. What a shocker. “I did it because there was nothing more than I’ve ever wanted.” It was still a composed statement, but Rachel sensed she just started hell. Very well then, bring on the flames, father.

Rose sighed deeply and sat on her own bed, clearing the space and ready to watch yet another battle. Thankfully, the hotel room wasn’t equipped with a lot of fragile objects, except some glasses and one mirror. She comprehended both sides of the dispute, always torn between supporting her adopted daughter and trying to keep her husband tranquil. One forgotten ember between two high risen
“Was it her idea?” James hissed. It was escalating quickly. “Was it Chloe?”

“No!” Rachel got up and smoked up, not bothered anymore by the regulations. This time it wasn’t her worry and her fees to pay. “To your surprise it was mine. I was so tired of those stupid doubts and suggestions that it’s just a high school thing, that we will break up or Chloe would just leave me. I wanted to be done with it, once and for all. I told you I don’t want to be with anybody but her. Now it’s official.” She shrugged. Even if the marriage was executed in such a rush and not planned at all, Rachel was damn happy that it had occurred. It was a bit childish to unload this on her father but every time she wanted to make a peace with him he had to cross the damn line. Crossing was the wrong expression though, it felt more like a ramming.

Her father wiped his forehead from drops of sweat and moved swiftly, fastening the seatbelt of his own heart going crazy. He shouldn’t go off the deep end so quickly. Although some illogical arguments had to be pitched to make this dispute less nonsensical.

“You can be with whoever you want to be, Rachel, and you proved it many times.” Mentioning this dirty drug dealer was always throwing her off balance. Very good. Point for him this time. “Did you even think about how it would look like on your record? Have you ever considered how it would affect your future?”

Rachel narrowed her eyes, blowing out an angry white swirl. Rose didn’t say a word seeing her daughter smoking but was very tempted to reprimand her for that matter. Yet again her wishes for a clean air and a nice, peaceful sleep were destroyed, while the mother and wife found herself imprisoned in the brawl between her beloved.

“Oh… My record?” Off Rachel’s patience went. Ah fuck, she was so close to sitting down again and now almost jumped. “Are you planning my life again?” Looking at her mother, she stifled the cigarette in one of the paper cups, sensing her disapproval. Dealing with her father’s ager was one thing, disappointing her Rose was never one of Rachel’s goals.

James’ eyes were shattered by the bloody net of red lines. He hadn’t slept well either but wasn’t keen on showing his weaknesses. Why did his child have to be so clueless?

“I’m not planning anything, Rachel. I just know you.” He stated. “I know you very well. If you disagree and argue with me so much why are you so persistent to repeat my mistakes? How long will it last, huh? A year? Two years? Till college? You really want to put yourself through a divorce at such young age? I’ve made this mistake. It’s hell. It’s a pure nightmare.” He hit the mattress with the open palm, fuming at his ineptitude and for pushing it way too far. Them being together for longer than a few years wasn’t even an option. A single paper wouldn’t change his daughter’s nature or her own character. Settling down with this blue punk could be her teenage dream, but as every one of those, would be crashed badly. James didn’t want his daughter to be a car crash dummy.

Rachel hissed gasping on air. Her fire was close to eruption.

“Divorce!?”

“James, please,” said Rose, sensing the outburst and predicting how much dust and ashes it would bring. “They just got married. Not now.”

Her effort led them nowhere, as usual, as always. Rachel rose her hand not willing to listen, driven to the edge. She expected James to suggest calling the whole thing off of course but not the very first day. Thankfully Chloe wasn’t here, she would get fucking livid.
“No, mom. Now. It’s better now than in five years or some other time.”

Father and daughter watched each other for a moment, both ready to jump at each other’s throats and start the wild part of the struggle. The hotel room got smaller, the walls were closing around them, heating the space with a lack of fresh air. Two beds, two chairs, a chest, a table, the flat screen TV. Their battleground. The war was not over.

“At least she’s not pregnant.” James scoffed looking at his wife and supposedly ignoring the blaze in the hazel eyes. It was an awkward attempt of cracking a joke, and Rachel didn’t appreciate his sense of humor.

“I’m sure you would find an amazing solution for that too, dad.” She sneered, and the suggestion left both parents speechless. “However, I have to disappoint you. I’m not pregnant and it would truly be a miracle if I would be in the nearest future.” Alright, she sorted one thing, it was time for the other. “What was your mistake, huh? What was the famous misstep you had made? You had to get married because you knocked up your high school girlfriend? I was the mistake? Me?” It was painful to even say it, but her fears and old sorrows had been woken up today regardless. She didn’t really wonder much about Sera or James’ first relationship but was it the reason why he hated Chloe that much? Was it because of her ‘other mother’?

James’ face got red in a weird and dangerous semi-purple way.

“No! I married your mother because I loved her!” He yelled touching his throat to make sure this explosion didn’t cost him his last breath.

Rose closed her eyes. “James, please,” she pleaded. Talking about Sera was never easy for her, even if she was more than aware about the whole story. Dragging out this persona wouldn’t help them, wouldn’t help Rachel. James was so impatient sometimes, so incredibly restive.

Their daughter didn’t let them wait long for a hasty response.

“So, do fucking understand that I did the same thing because of the same reason!”

Even James noticed they were going in circles in this argument. Yet another battle lost, a white flag was in order. He couldn’t take any more preposterous disagreements, trying to express his concerns at the same time. This bed was so comfortable, he wouldn’t mind laying down and resting a moment, even falling asleep.

“Oh! What’s done is done. I hope you both know what you’re doing.” He surrendered and leaned over the pillows, focusing on his breath and the choking heartbeat. His hand was becoming numb, he couldn’t feel his fingers.

The war was not over though.

It would never be over.

“We do, dad.” Rachel retreated as well, letting her benevolent side to take over finally. She really didn’t mean any harm and her father’s sharp inhales were getting her worried. “Can you just be happy for me? Can you just be… glad, even if I’ve made a decision you don’t agree with? Please. I know you have doubts. I know you think my life could look differently, but please, please, can you just be happy with my choice for once?” She finished, playing nervously with the paper cup. Her throat tightened up over the last words, making her voice hoarse and raucous. The dead smoke inside the cup made the water undrinkable though.

Both parents were looking at her in silence, both contemplating and pondering her plea. No one
wanted to fight over this issue, not much today at least. Rose smiled to her and nodded, showing her
gratitude. James snorted, knowing he had lost yet again, this time disarmed by his daughter’s
peaceful wish.

“I accept your choice, Rachel. It’s your life, your decision and your future. You wanted me to be
honest with you, therefore you understand that I can’t force myself to be cheerful and enthusiastic at
this point. Rachel...” He shook his head, thankful for the pillows. “I really loved your mother. I really
loved Sera and I hoped for the best marrying her. I look at Chloe and you both and I see my own
past, my youth, my own careless decisions I’ve made. I understand the passion and the dedication,
because I’ve experienced it and it ended badly. That kind of love doesn’t mean to last.”

It was probably the most sincere and honest confession that James Amber had ever made. His
daughter was listening carefully and even if wincing on part of his statements, she was understanding
more and more about his reservations. Everybody was judging from their own perspective and her
father wasn’t an exception. Sera Gearhardt, this unknown, mysterious persona, got thrown into the
play making his argument reasonable. It wouldn’t change much though, but at least Rachel knew
what he was afraid of.

Fair point, she had to admit it.

“If that love doesn’t mean to last, I don’t want any other kind.” She whispered. “Chloe is no Sera,
dad. Even if your story is similar it doesn’t mean we would end up the same way.” Whatever her
father was thinking, her blue treasure would never betray her, never leave for a cheap vice, never
give up on her and them as a couple. Rachel had never asked about the details, forgetting about her
biological mother’s existence for the sake of Rose and her own sanity. Although, she started to
wonder if any unknown fact would give her a leverage to refute his arguments, widening his
horizons.

“It usually does, Rachel.” Her father rubbed his chest, trying to calm down his pulse. “It usually
does.”

“I won’t allow it to happen.”

James Amber smiled sadly remembering himself saying exactly the same words and even in the same
tone. His daughter was reminding him so much of himself that it was almost painful. Not waiting to
learn from his mistakes, she repeated them unrelentingly. As a father he couldn’t wave it aside, as a
human being he appreciated it.

“I would expect nothing less.” He said only. “Rachel... Despite all the terrible burden and struggles
your biological mother put me through, I’ve always loved you. I’ve got a wonderful, amazing
daughter from this relationship and that’s the best thing that ever happened to me. You were a
miracle, not a mistake, Rachel. Don’t you ever think that way.” Then he looked at her hand, still
grasping on the paper cup. “You got your wedding bands tattooed?”

“Yeah, we did.”

“Kids.” James shook his head, finally reaching for his glass of water. “Damn kids.”

“Don’t you tell me that it’s removable too.”

Her father was looking at her for a very long moment, then at her finger with her wife’s name
permanently written, then at her engagement ring, and he sighed. She was young, stubborn, in love
and determined. No parent would stand a chance, and James Amber really didn’t want them to
become enemies for life.
What was done, was done.

“No, I really hope you’ll cover it one day with some decent metal band instead. People don’t really trust lawyers with drawings on their hands.” He took a long sip of water and then rolled his eyes. Alright. Very well then. “I’m not sure about a car mechanic or whatever Chloe wants to do for a living.”

The ice cover, layering up for years, finally cracked, broken by this simple sentence. Rachel’s face lit up, as her fire diminished, leaving her unburnt and hella relieved. It was a very small step, but the path to an acceptance was open and she was damn sure it would get wider and broader with time. Not trusting her words, she got up and hugged him for the first time since the Long Beach visit, this time not holding back. Her mother was next, and any spoken language wasn’t necessary to communicate.

They talked a little bit later though, sitting by each other, discussing the weather, real estate market and the pre-law programs. Just an hour with her family, one versus two, but no battle planned. Rachel hadn’t felt that good in months, years maybe. Something changed, something clicked, and it was a good difference.

“Rachel?” Her father stopped her when she opened the door, ready to get back home and into the blue arms.

“Yeah?”

“I cancelled your credit card.” He murmured, making himself more comfortable between the pile of pillows.

Rachel rose her eyebrow, but just smiled gently. That was why the towing company hadn’t brought the old rusty back yet, there was a payment problem. She would have to call them back and reschedule, since her small provocation left her without greater funds accessible. Her and Chloe would manage, and Rachel would pay to be a fly on the wall when he checked the bank statement. Hopefully it was the last time any provocation was needed, and they would come to some terms, keeping their relations decent.

“Oh yes, I know. I would expect nothing less, dad.” She winked, leaving them in their luxury and rushing back to her own.

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“Steph? Oh Jesus, thank God.” Chloe almost lost her hopes and jumped when the call got picked up. “What’s up, dude? I tried to call Max like a bijilion times and she just drops me every time. Is everything ok?”

It was damn fucking late to call anybody, but the little freckle decided to keep ignoring her, making her pirate captain concerned. Either she was sleeping or busy with something else. Chloe was a little bit iffy to call Steph, not sure if a phone call wouldn’t disturb with some nice gay shit they had been doing, but apparently Max’s girlfriend didn’t mind. Much.

“She might be a little bit angry at you.” Steph said coldly, apparently also not very much pleased.

The blue rebel sighed and started to walk around the backyard, feeling instantly guilty. She would prefer a face-to-face talk, but Max got her worried. All the shit she had done with calling Rachel’s
parents was more than upsetting. What the hell was she thinking?

“Figured. Sorry, man.” She took another sip of the beer, grateful that David wasn’t home to complain about his stocks being depleted. It barely contained any alcohol anyway and Chloe needed some courage to talk to her friends, after all the mess and them being kinda missing. “Do you think you can give her your phone and let me talk to her a bit?”

Steph sighed deeply and then got silent, also wondering how to explain the actual situation to the blue cheerfulness. Those phone calls were so uncomfortable in moments like this. Max should tell her first though, Chloe was her best friend.

“I’m afraid it won’t be possible.” She replied, hoping to save the big news for another day, or not being forced to say it aloud. Her girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend so to speak could explain everything with details, as she was always willing to. Steph wasn’t sure how much Chloe knew about the problems in their little dorm paradise, but assumed she wasn’t unfamiliar with the case entirely. Max probably had mentioned something, even if just bits and pieces.

“Why?” Chloe remained oblivious. “Are you partying with some hookers and cocaine again? Saturday evening without your girlfriend, huh?” She laughed cracking yet another joke and not really sensing the tension. Steph was probably running another DnD campaign and Max’s character either died or gave up the adventure.

“Yeah, because you know it’s just my style, right.”

The sarcastic tone of Steph’s voice made Chloe frown. She walked to the old swing, still hanging on the rusty chains her father had assembled and sat down with the beer in hand. Childhood memories were going pretty well with a tad of liquor. She had gotten drunk here so many times before, begging for Rachel to call and crying her eyes out, that it felt too fitting. Her won misery place, visited always when she was concerned.

Chloe was concerned as hell to be honest.

“What’s wrong, Steph?” She dropped all the cheerfulness in her voice, rocking the old swing a little. “Did something happen?”

Another sigh, breathe in, breathe out. Steph tried to say something, then she didn’t, stayed silent, and made a weird noise. A glass? Was she drinking? Nah, this girl was usually refusing any kind of booze, especially with Max around, present or not. Chloe grew bigger in her worry thinking of what could’ve happened, what was going on.

“We…” Steph’s voice broke in half. “Kinda broke up?”

“What?” Chloe stopped swinging.

Her friend took a long sip of whatever she was drinking, then moved around, probably trying to keep the conversation away from the ears of others. Chloe heard her careful and silent steps, the doors opening and closing. She bit her fingernail, waiting for an explanation, hoping it wasn’t as bad as it sounded. However, Gandalf the gay wouldn’t state anything so definite if it wasn’t true. Steph was no drama queen, in that matter especially.

Up and down, up and down said the swing slowly.

“We broke up. I mean…” She closed another door and apparently that let her speak more freely. “I moved out and I’m staying with Drew and Mikey now. It’s a long story.”
“Make it shorter.” The blue concern pushed for more, leaving the shape of her fingernail in a terrible state. “What happened?”

The ice in her glass tinkled lightly when Steph sat down still trying to find the right words. It was still painful to even think about what had happened, not to mention describing it. Chloe Price was Max’s friend, not hers, and she didn’t want to create any conflicts between those two. Talking to Rachel would probably be way simpler, but the formal queen of Blackwell hadn’t called her back yet. Steph had always been feeling weird while chatting about her relationship problems, not sharing any shades of dark. Chloe’s girlfriend, even if they didn’t interact much and gossiping wasn’t a common occurrence, always had this amazing ability of making people comfortable and feel listened to. The harsh pirate was way too short-tempered and too connected to Max to take any confessions.

“She freaked out after you fucking disappeared and was driving me crazy for three days straight.” Steph took another sip and winced. Drinking wasn’t her game for sure. “She didn’t eat, didn’t go to class, got obsessed with finding you, calling your parents and everybody around. I lost my patience and here we are.”

Making Chloe feeling guilty wasn’t her intention, but the blue worry blamed herself anyway, especially with so-called happy news to proclaim. She put down the beer bottle, not wanting to touch any alcohol for a very long time. Steph had apparently tried to get wasted and it was her right. Chloe needed her head clear though.

“Oh fuck, man. I’m so sorry.” She answered, knowing from experience that no words would help now. “Is there anything I can do?”

“I really don’t know. She...” Steph’s voice was breaking again into small, weak pieces. She really hoped that no one would see the big picture, her own suffering. Chloe knew anyway. Been there, done that. “Max really needs help. She was going fucking nuts. I know I should’ve been there for her, but I just couldn’t.”

The blue pirate started swaying the swing again, thankful for the air moving and waking her up. She was so busy with her own dramas and problems, focusing on Rachel and everything that involved them both, that she had forgotten old friends and how dedicated they were, Max included. Another crazy quest and a frantic investigation were a natural turn of events at this point and she couldn’t blame her little freckle for overreacting. She thought about those innocent moments they had both spent here, playing between the fence and the backyard door, creating their own, private, colorful world. Nothing was left from the childhood dreams, everything got ripped apart by so-called growing up.

“No, dude, I get you.” The swing got her up a little, forced to take a wider perspective. “Everybody has their limits, right? I will talk to her though. We will sort it out.” Chloe promised, empty from ideas on how to solve this issue. Her only wish was Max speaking to her again, after learning why she and Rachel just bailed out, eloped, not giving a single fuck about anybody’s else feelings.

Yes, she felt goddamn guilty.

“Yeah, maybe.” Steph had given up all her hopes already. Her glass was almost empty, third one this evening. It should be more than enough to knock her down, but she was still feeling sober. “Thanks though. So, where have you been, you fucking assholes? We alarmed the whole town, like for real.”

The blue pirate grinded her teeth, not sure how to start her explanation. It would be more than fair to start from the beginning, Frank, the photos, notes, Victoria, the drive, proposal and the final outcome, but felt inappropriate. Even her bruised face and the scars inside weren’t as hurtful as this news. Max and Steph not together? It was really a shocker.
“Long story, Steph.” She answered, kicking the beer bottle by accident. It was for the best anyway, have a nice drink, you dying grass.

“Make it shorter.” Her friend gave her a taste of her own medicine.

Chloe rocked the swing even more, as the highest waves would help with her bravery; it actually requested some to admit what they had done. It wasn’t a bad thing, nothing shameful, but facing a tragedy it felt so wrong to share their joy.

“We got married.” She confessed lastly, blurting it out fast and closing her eyes.

“Ah…” Steph scoffed, smirking. It was a damn sad smile. “Well, congrats then. Should I call you Mrs. Amber now?”

She wouldn’t try to mock her, but Chloe felt ridiculed regardless. Here she was, a problem maker, a hell raiser, babbling about her haste wedding, when her friends were quite literally losing their minds, trying to find her, find her girl. Three days, three fucking days and so many changes for so many people. She wanted so badly for Rachel to be here, hoping her wife was not in the middle of yet another battle, and this thought stained her conscience with even more dirt. Max should be on her mind now, not the blond angel.

It had to be fixed. It would be. Somehow.

“The other way around actually.” She murmured, remembering the famous skirmish over the last name in the living room a few hours ago.

“You don’t say.” The same bittersweet tone. It was getting more uncomfortable for both of them. “Then we’ll have to celebrate or something.”

Swinging intensified. A festival of congratulations could be postponed for the next century as far as Chloe was concerned. She wouldn’t be able to stand a grim party, with her friends separated and heartbroken wishing them all the best. The blue worry attended enough funerals in her life and didn’t want her own reception to have the same feeling.

“Yeah, maybe one day. Thanks, dude. And call me anytime you need something, alright?” She changed the subject swiftly, getting dizzy from the swinging.

“I think Max needs you more than me, Chloe.” Steph nodded, knowing it was time to end this. Would they even talk again? Would they still be friends? Breakups were always loaded with friends divided between the two parties. There was no question who Chloe would pick. “Thanks for the offer though. Have a good night. Both of you. Congrats.”

The end of the call left Chloe alone in the dark backyard with her childhood hopes in mind and the old swing still swaying. She finally stood up, leaving it all behind, walking into the empty, lit up house, summoned as a moth to the light, as a lonely pirate to the safe harbor by the lonely beam of the lighthouse. First landing, then problems.

Tons, loads of problems.

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She parked in front of the garage, noticing the truck hadn’t been towed yet. They probably would
have to rearrange the delivery date, since the credit card got canceled and Rachel wasn’t sure if she had enough funds on her checking account. Her father’s financial punishment wouldn’t be that painful if the old rusty was still up and running. She was barely using the card anyway and when they were in need, the Ambers’ fortune wasn’t accessible. Ah, life. She would have to ask around for a job or some part-time gig at least. Chloe spent a small fortune in Portland and now they were both damn poor. Interesting, first day at home and Rachel was already thinking about the expenses. Marriage was a strange thing for sure.

Closing the door to her red roadster, she looked around sensing a change of air, a weird frequency of being watched. Cedar Avenue was drowning in darkness, diffused only by the small, weak street lamps in front of the houses. Rachel narrowed her eyes, trying to piece the nightfall with her vigilant sight, but everything seemed to be in order, as the street slowly was falling asleep not excited about yet another Saturday evening. Somebody was there though, somebody was observing her the whole time. Noticing a familiar looking shadow on the other side of the road, Rachel could swear it was a man wearing a baseball cap, hiding himself behind the tall, thorny bushes. She breathed in sharply through clenched teeth, grabbing her phone, thankfully already charged.

She knew who that was.

The shadow fluttered between the dark silhouettes of barbed plants when Rachel found the right number and pressed it starting a call. Was she really hearing a vibration, a tiny shade of a ringtone or was it just her vivid imagination? They had to talk either way, why not kill two birds with one stone and the same phone call?

“We need to talk.” She said when he picked up, still watching the house and the black hedge. Something cracked on the other side. His connection was shit or his mobile was garbage. Frank Bowers never paid attention to technology more than he needed. He loved living out of trash he found.

Was it making her a trash too?

“We are taking, Rachel.” She heard his voice, first time in months. Weird feeling. “What do you want?”

Hesitant to walk to the house and having this conversation with Chloe present, she leaned over the car and then sat on the hood in a similar manner her father had done a few hours prior. It was her first attempt to contact him since the unfortunate night, since he re-evaluated and transformed her life forever. Rachel Price should be thankful for this change, regarding the result, but wouldn’t mind rewinding time, if possible.

No rewinds were accessible at the moment, please call back later.

“I want to talk to you in person.” She said simply, probing her emotions with a ten feet pole, checking what she was feeling exactly. Not intimidated, not afraid, not scared, but some kind of fear was still there. Some kind of nightmare.

Frank Bowers was too feeble to be her nightmare though.

“Forget it.” He answered, and she got sure he was drinking again. It didn’t surprise her but would make the conversation harder. Frank had been very forgetful, especially if under the influence. Rachel hoped her whole effort and the private civil war she was battling inside wouldn’t go to shit as well.

“I’ve seen you by the house today.” She informed him, dragging out a smoke. A red, fast spark
flashing on the other side indicated he also decided to amuse himself with a cigarette. “I’m still seeing you.”

“So?” She could hear him inhaling. “None of your business.”

Frank could pretend as much as he wanted that it was about Chloe. Rachel knew better regardless. He had never been good at pretending with anything, being a shitty actor in the stage of life. Why he was stalking her girl was still a mystery, although she suspected it was about the photos. This bastard would risk his well-being for some cheap, homemade porn and a few notes. Why the hell had she gotten involved with him again? Her life would be so much simpler if he didn’t exist or just simply vanished.

Wishful thinking didn’t help much. She took another grey drag.

“You know very well it’s my business.” If she started to threaten him again and call him all the names in the book it wouldn’t do any good, now or in the future. She had to play it right. She had to be careful. “Can we meet tomorrow?”

“No. Not tomorrow.” The flicker on the other side moved rapidly. Frank didn’t expect a meeting. “I will let you know when. Maybe.” Damn, he really wanted to see her again in the daylight, maybe hoping for more than a simple talk. Rachel didn’t want to disabuse him, not promising much. Despite all his wrongdoings she still felt sorry for him somehow, not wanting to hurt him on purpose. On the other hand, she wouldn’t mind seeing him dead and buried, then dug out and killed yet again.

“Frank…” She said carefully.

“Rachel…” He whispered.

Oh God, he was still holding some hopes, he was still wanting her back. After all those months Frank Bowers just couldn’t get over her, following her like a puppy with sharp, nasty fangs. She had to calm him down somehow, take control. No one could get hurt again, her wife especially.

It started to feel like a cheap romcom.

“Stay away.” Rachel closed her eyes, hoping that a clear warning would be enough but not too much. Just a few words, standing her ground. “Don’t come here. Don’t do anything to Chloe. Just… Stop.” She tapped out the ash.

He stayed silent for a while, thinking.

“And will you really meet me if I stop?”

“Yes.” She confirmed, surprised how cheap she had to pay for this conversation. Rachel expected to be torn, exposed, even crying a little, but nothing could break her now. Not him, not after everything.

“Deal.” And the call had ended. The spark on the other side moved and then started to fade away as Frank Bowers was leaving them in peace, at least for one more night, but not forever for sure.

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When she came back home, the living room welcomed her with emptiness and the dim light of
fireplace’s embers. David and Joyce were working late tonight, since they had to rearrange their whole schedule regarding the morning trip to Portland. Chloe was nowhere to be seen, although some interesting sounds of moving things around were coming from upstairs. Rachel peeked at the staircase, but since no one came to give her a kiss, she decided to take another slice of this apple pie. Previously she was barely able to swallow anything, cornered by questions and queries, now she finally felt relaxed enough to treat herself with a cake. Her wedding cake to be exact.

She was in the middle of her piece when the loud steps drummed on the stairs and the blue devil appeared, with her hair still wet after the shower, still dressed up and not prepared for bed.

“Here you are.” Rachel took another bite. “I thought you left me already.”

“Not a damn chance.” The broad smile appeared at once as Chloe walked closer and sat on the kitchen counter. Joyce always hated her doing it, but since the parents weren’t around she could indulge herself. “I just took advantage of the fact that the house is all ours tonight.”

One of the blond eyebrows got raised up, as Rachel bit her lip not hiding her seductive smirk.

“Hmm… I’m afraid to ask what kind of advantage and why I wasn’t present.” Oh, damn, obligations first, pleasure later. “And before you will melt me down with all the descriptions I want to tell you I called Bowers.” She confessed, hoping that Chloe wouldn’t overreact much.

Surprisingly her girl remained calm and not bothered by the news by any means. Either she didn’t want to think about Frank Bowers or she had more important things on her mind. Rachel was usually very reluctant about mentioning the biggest mistake of her life, expecting the air to thicken instantly, but a shrug was the only reaction.

Interesting.

“Why?” Chloe took a bite of an apple, the only eatable thing at the counter at the moment, too lazy to jump off and find anything else. “To set up a meeting?”

Rachel nodded, sensing a trap. Her girl was up to something, and she couldn’t figure out if it was a nice or an upsetting surprise. Curiosity was one of her flaws, but this time she didn’t want to give it a go.

“Yes. He couldn’t give me any date, so he’ll get back to me soon. I don’t want you to freak out when it happens.” Ah damn, she lost her appetite already. The fork got dropped on a plate. Fuck this cake. “Here you have the not hiding shit. Kills the mood, huh?”

“Not really.” Chloe frowned. Her perception over Frank changed a lot this afternoon. Previously, every time he had been mentioned she suspected some kind of treachery, a betrayal. Now he was just an obstacle, a different kind of danger. “He lost the ability to kill my mood. We’ll deal with him when the time comes. Now I want to focus on you and you only. Bowers can go to hell.” Another bite of an apple left her hands covered with a sweet and sticky juice.

“Chloe Price, so responsible and composed.” Rachel leaned in her chair, crossing her arms on her chest. “I’m impressed.”

The blue rebel jumped off trying to find a kitchen towel or paper tissue to wipe up her hands. Not finding anything around she sighed deeply turning on the tap and cleaning her hands with soap and water. Rachel rose her eyebrow again. No shirt staining, interesting. Were they about to go somewhere?
“That’s the marriage thing.” Chloe responded, biting one last chunk and throwing out the fruit’s leftovers.

“Oh, you got married?”

“Haven’t you heard?”

Rachel loved this game and it was nice to play it once again, especially after such a tense day. She pondered for a moment, pretending to think intensely, then tilted her head, biting her finger lightly.

“No, I had to miss the note.” She narrowed her eyes. “Is she hot?”

Chloe was watching her fingertip dancing on the half-open lips with extreme interest, chewing her last bite of the apple slowly. Obviously, she was considering her options, getting hungry again and Rachel didn’t have to ask what was on her mind right now.

“I couldn’t score better.” The blue rebel snorted finally. “She’s hot, sexy, smart, beautiful, and the most amazing human being I’ve ever met. I highly suspect that I married an angel or something.” A smoke would be very much appreciated, but she only touched the pack of Marlboro on the counter not taking advantage of its contents. Rachel got even more intrigued. Chimney-smoking pirate refusing a cigarette after a snack wasn’t a usual view.

“Be careful, I’m pretty sure marrying angels is illegal.” She responded not losing her game. “It might, depends on the state though.”

“One evening with your father and you got back to the lawyers’ talk.” Mentioning James Amber was usually as safe as getting back to Bowers. Chloe retreated quickly. “Anyway, there is one more thing we have to do today.” She winced, bulking her pockets with her hands and obviously ready to reveal the big bombshell. Judging by her cheerful tone it was supposed to be good, but Rachel could sense some nervousness behind the nonchalant words.

“Oh, yeah?” Her curiosity was growing every second, making her excited and anxious at the same time. “What’s the obligation Mrs. Price?”

“Oh God, now I feel old.” Chloe rolled her eyes and blushed a little. She noticed the copper rose, now cleaned out and shiny, resting on the counter after Joyce used all her magic to bring it back to its full glory. Both mothers were very touched by the story of their first wedding gift and found it adorable. Chloe couldn’t stop wondering if they would react the same way seeing the stupid deer shit-painting.

“You will never be old.” Rachel’s voice distracted her from admiring the metal flower. “I will always remember you as this adorable, sixteen-year-old dork, even when your face gets marked with wrinkles and your hair grows white and then falls out.”

Scratching her head and proving that nothing would fall from it anytime soon, Chloe smirked suggestively and crouched in front of her girl trying to find something charming and sweet to say. Unfortunately, she didn’t speak cute shit as seamlessly as her wife.

“Long time planning, Amber...” The blue pirate cut herself off. “Damn.”

“Oh, you’re mistaking me for somebody else, I presume.” Of course, Rachel had to take the opportunity to point out the mistake. “You should remember my last name though, it’s yours after all.”
“It kills the fun, you know that.”

“That’s another reason why I decided to do it. No last name stage anymore, unless you want to sound ridiculous or be punished for it.” Rachel got back to her apple pie after all, pretending she wasn’t interested at all. “So, what’s the one more thing you were talking about?” She mentioned the topic, swallowing the last bite.

“Alright, so...” Chloe looked at their hands, caressing Rachel’s fingers. The wedding band, the bloody mark of the cut, the perfect shape of the wrist, some old loosen bracelets. “Remember when you told me that I was your first...” The wave of doubts if that was even a good idea hit her confidence’s shore, but the blue pirate was resistant to this surge this time.

“Yeah, I do remember.” Rachel rested her head on her hand fascinated even more. What was this blue devil planning? “The circumstances of this confession were unfortunate though.”

“Fuck circumstances.” Her girl growled, desperately trying to not sidetrack from the issue. She knew it was Rachel’s self-defense and very personal way of protecting herself from melting the hell down, but Chloe wanted her to melt down actually. On purpose. “I promised you a proper first time since I acted like an animal.” It hadn’t been that bad actually. Chloe acted more like an unsure teddy bear than a wild monster, but she liked to pretend otherwise.

“I like animals, especially blue animals.” Rachel bit her lip stifling her laugh. “It was the best and most memorable first time in the history.”

“You are changing the subject constantly and I’m not sure if you do it because you are afraid to blush, or you just want me to feel hella stupid.” The blue rebel bit her lip wondering if she would ever be able to put her plan into action. Her girl loved to complicate all those moments, always trying to have the last word. Usually she wouldn’t mind, but this time it was important, and the surprise required a lot of work and preparations. Moreover, the whole house would get burnt down if Rachel decided to distract her more.

“You know me too well, Price.” The second name stage was supposed to be forbidden and then made an unexpected appearance. It meant that Rachel was getting hella shy. “And I’ve never wanted you to feel hella stupid. Much.”

Chloe bowed her head even more and smiled very, very softly.

“I have a surprise...” She murmured.

“Oh, yeah?” The blush appeared regardless. Of course. Rachel couldn’t even pretend anymore, giving up upon the tender touch.

“Yeah.” She nodded and stood up, still with her fingers laced with hers. “Spirit, take my hands, most faithful friend...” Chloe started hoping she would remember the quote correctly. Shakespeare wasn’t her strength, along with other dead poets, but this was a sacrifice she was willing to take with a pure pleasure. The delight intensified, when she noticed Rachel’s eyes opening widely. Some angelic wife finally figured what was planned for tonight.

“I can’t cry anymore.” Her girl tucked her hair behind her ear but got up as well. “I reached my limit.”

Chloe shook her head, confirming that no shedding of tears was planned anytime soon.

“For but a little longer I beseech; continue in thy service to my schemes.” She continued leading Rachel through the hallway. “Which means you have to walk upstairs, I can’t carry you there, no
“Freaking way.”

“Chloe…” Rachel moaned, unsure and a little bit restrained. She looked at the staircase, then at Chloe, then at the steps again. Whatever was awaiting her up there wasn’t intimidating or threatening, on the contrary. Something was stopping her though, some weird feeling of being unworthy.

“C’mon, it won’t be that bad, I promise.” Her pirate pulled her hand lightly encouraging to follow her upstairs. Rachel followed indeed, stroking the handrail lightly. “I will seek to make thy happiness so great that e’en… eee… Damn… eee…” Her memory failed her just in front of the door to their room.

“…The name of liberty’s…” Rachel whispered almost subconsciously.

“…The name of liberty’s forgot.” The door got open and she was let through first. “What sayest thou to my most hopeful wish?” Chloe followed her closely and kissed the back of her neck, when her girl was looking around, baffled by the surprise.

Rachel didn’t even hear the last words, completely swept off her feet. If Chloe had felt that way years ago on the Blackwell stage, when those words were spoken the very first time, it was damn impressive she hadn’t fainted. She looked around, with her mouth open, tangling her hand in her golden hair. The whole room was drowning in candlelight, lighting up the floor and bed covered with the rose petals. Her girl went through the whole nine yards to make her silly teenage dream come true and she outstood herself greatly. Even the sheets were changed into something shiny, and Rachel suspected it could be either silk or satin.

“Oh my God…” She gasped, with her jaw dropped.

“That’s one way to say it.” Some blue pirate was damn proud of herself.

“How did… You… Why?” Rachel stuttered looking around not believing her own eyes. She knew where it was going but didn’t expect that much. Her breath hitched in her throat, made her chest tensed.

“You told me that you are painfully romantic sometimes.” The blue blush tried to smile, but her courage was slowly leaving her, surpassed by the sudden coyness. “And I wanted to do something special. You deserve everything special I can give and more.” It was supposed to be her wedding gift if this mess could be any kind of those. Chloe didn’t want to think about what her mother would say seeing the remains of today celebrations. Perhaps nothing, well, hopefully not much. Maybe she would be understanding in this matter as well.

Rachel turned back to her still startled and stunned.

“Roses? How? When?” She had been gone only for a few hours, and her girl was busy with her own family issues. There was no way that she would ask David or Joyce for help, they left for work early anyway. It had to be prepared in advance or Chloe had grown a pair of wings in the meantime, not being able to drive her truck around.

Perfect girls being way too perfect.

“Does it matter?” Her pirate smirked not keen on dwelling on how much her neighbors would hate her for destroying all their gardens. She had to unleash her dark sometimes though, and the ends justified the means in this case. “And now, if my mistress allows…”

There was nothing in the world that would make Rachel refuse. Chloe took off her jacket, dragged
out her shirt, unclasped her bra slowly. First, she felt silly prolonging so much, but her girl really enjoyed the waiting. Patience was always paying her back impressively and she could feel it reward her this time as well. They were usually so fierce, so fast and impatient, always hungry and starving for each other. Now, liberating each other from the clothes seemed more like a ritual than an actual urge. Looking at each other in that stupid candlelight, flickering with the glimpse of wind, they really felt it was special.

And when they were ready, Chloe sighed, rolled her eyes, sniffled and stopping herself from another awkward move, put Rachel’s hand on her neck, then another on her shoulder and lifted up without a single gasp. The gasp would appear if she had more than five steps to the bed though, and the blue pirate was very grateful not to slip on one of those red petals. It was romantic, alight, but damn devious. She expected Rachel to say something clever, ruin the mood a little, making it more lighthearted, but her wife was quiet and docile, not willing to destroy a single bit of this magic.

They looked at each other, feeling weirdly happy, delaying the first proper kiss, building the fire slowly with unhurried touches. It really felt like the first time even if not even twenty hours ago they had had experienced something way fiercer.

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to.” Chloe whispered, thinking about all the things said earlier, about all the horrors and secrets uncovered. Then she felt dumb again, thinking why she hadn’t said it this one afternoon at the junkyard instead.

“If I didn’t want something, I would tell you, baby.” Rachel shook her head as the blonde mane covered the pillow. “If you want to, I’m ready.” She stroked the line of the blue jaw. “C’mon here.” A kiss was in order. Soft, gentle, just like the first one ever. “Come to me.”

It was new. It was different. Whatever they said about marriage it was always different, and this wedding gift wasn’t an exception. The touch was well known, the kisses tasted the same, but no one was in a hurry or in urge to finish. They had all the time in the world to be as tender and as slow as they wanted, and they took advantage of it fully, exploring, sensual but not provoking, shy but not embarrassed. At some point they started to speed up of course, enjoying the fact of being home alone and giving as much and as loud of each other, letting the fire burn but not surrendering the sensitivity. Nothing was expected in return, nothing was demanded and yet everything was served without haste or shame.

When they were done, at least for now at least, they stayed unmoving for a longer while, both questioning themselves why they hadn’t tried it before, always straining at the leash ready to burn down in seconds. They wouldn’t mind repeating it one day, perhaps without the candles and roses included, but they knew very well it wouldn’t replace their usual routine.

It made it even more special.

“Chloe?” Rachel murmured, laying on the blue chest with a dreamy smile and walking her fingers through some tattoos and bare skin of her wife.

“Yeah?”

“Are you still scared?”

Silk sheets were way overrated. Chloe moved around, trying to make herself more comfortable, but the whole bed was slippery, including her pillow. Why everybody thought it was way more romantic than a cozy blanket was beyond her, but whatever Rachel needed. Whatever she wanted.

“I don’t know how to tell you that, Rach, but holding you naked is not as scary as you might think.”
Even smoking right now would be a safety hazard. The blue pirate was sure the whole bed would go up in flames if a single spark dropped on the comforter. “Jokes aside, I’m not. Not much at least. We have some stuff to do, some places to go and people to meet, but I’m not really afraid of it. The only thing that scares me is that I might lose you one day.” Her thoughts went to her dad and how devastated she had been after losing him forever. If something happened to Rachel, she wouldn’t be able to function, breathe or even drink herself to death, like previously. This blond wonder was her whole world, full stop.

“You won’t lose me. My leash is too short.” Rachel took the words more literally. Chloe’s neck got kissed. “And jokes aside, I love you too much. What? Why are you smiling?”

The blue rebel, not really rebelling against anything anymore, was looking at the ceiling, caressing her girl’s shoulder with a slow wave of her fingers. Something had changed, something was different this time. Old fears had died, perhaps replaced by the new threats, but Chloe Price was sure about one thing and it made her heart grow in a distinctive, magical way.

“Because I know that.” She replayed. “I know you won’t leave me. Took me some time, huh?”

Her wife got so silent, overthinking the statement. She really hoped it wasn’t caused because of Frank and the desperate confession today, but by her own charm and the hard work instead. Waiting for Chloe to finally realize it had taken her years and now the outcome was making Rachel Price unsure. Her worries were erased quickly with one blue kiss, and then another as somebody possessed a secret knowledge on how to read her mind.

“Finally.” She whispered and then laughed freely. Whatever made Chloe to finally break out from the cage of her own doubts, the result was more than appreciated. “Jesus Christ, it really took you forever.” Rachel threw some rose petals at her and then got punished for such a blunt gesture with even more kisses.

“Rachel...” Chloe sighed after yet another long moment of stroking Rachel’s shoulder and a ceiling-watching session.

“Yeah?”

“Can you use some of your superpowers and blow out those candles?”

The blond head got lifted from her chest as the hazel eyes sparkled in suspicion.

“My superpowers called move my ass from the bed?” Rachel sneered, but obediently freeing herself from the blue embrace started to kill the fires on her side of the room. They were both pretty tired and it would be way too hazardous to fall asleep with all those candles around. Chloe scratched her head, noticing her hair was still wet and got up too, slipping on some of the petals. No candles and roses again, over her dead body. Unless she would be asked again for those.

“Damn, I knew those candles were tricky.” She muttered, after the first thirty flames were killed. Thank God the smoke alarm was turned off, otherwise their night would get richer with the annoying beeping shit noise. Another reason not to use those things, or not more than a few at once. The whole room smelled like one big campfire.

“You know what’s really tricky, Chloe Price?” asked Rachel when they got back to bed and, seeing her girl blowing on her fingers, she kissed them, thanking for her firefighter’s toil.

“What?”
“That you have to call me your wife now.” She laughed trying to cover them both with the silk sheet. It wasn’t really warm or cozy, and Rachel missed their old blanket. “Scary.” She kissed the blue nose and fell on the pillows.

“No, not scary.” Chloe smiled, stifling the last flame with her already burnt fingers. “Not scary at all.”
Pirates and Skeletons

Rachel inhaled fast, trying to stamp out an overwhelming feeling of her chest getting heavy. It felt weird getting uncomfortable with her own breath, infected with the school dust, the smell of old photographs, the artificial stench of oxygen and aluminum. She leaned over one of the class tables, adjusting her rugged white wings, now sadly sagged and dangling, barely attached to her arms through a simple, satin ribbon. Her fingers caressed the old carvings on the desk’s surface. ‘Rachel Amber forever’. She bit her lip lightly, tilting her head. It wasn’t Amber anymore. The joke had gotten old within a few days though. She was tired of correcting her colleagues and friends, annoyed by the ignorance and obliviousness.

The room seemed swampy and sticky, lit up only by the disturbing high halogen lights coming from the corridor and the fireworks of the torches outside. Rachel scanned the colorful and joyful crowd, thronging on Blackwell’s front yard, uniting and fusing with each other. She didn’t want to be part of it, not tonight anyway or not yet. Sealed behind the window, exposed but still hidden, she watched them unbothered but still perturbed. They all felt so far away, muted by the glass, a cheerful-like flock of moths gathering by the light. The last time Blackwell had grown united so substantially was at the vigil, roughly two weeks ago. Kelly Davis had been forgotten already though, even if all her friends and fellow students dressed up like the horrors and nightmares that could happen to her.

It was better to forget the horrors anyway. Move on.

Rachel was expected to join the merry crew, dance and enjoy the last night of October, but it felt weird and strange to be part of this celebration. Not after what had happened today, what was still going on in her head. She looked at the photos displayed in the glass cabinets, supposedly untouched by time but still bleached, wrinkled by the exhibit. Smiled faces and hundreds of dead eyes enchanted in the pieces of glossy paper watched her intensely and paid way more attention than the crowd outside. Rachel adjusted her wings one more time, took off her wreath with an aureole and ran her fingers through her hair, wondering why she had even decided to come here tonight. Staying home would be worse though since there was no chance to be left entirely alone.

She needed her time alone.

The classroom door cracked open a little bit more, when a dark figure eclipsed the unbearably bright hallway’s lights. Somebody discovered her, somebody noticed the space wasn’t empty. Rachel didn’t move, hoping to be left unnoticed or simply ignored. The visitor stopped for a moment though and then smoothly strolled to her, respecting her shadows and not turning the light on. It wasn’t a student or any of her friends though, but a member of the facility. Somebody neutral, who didn’t know much about her struggles, conflicts and the chaotic mess inside her mind.

“Rachel… Price, I presume?” She nodded when he asked walking closer. The barely hearable pause before her last name was upsetting and soothing at the same time. The world was getting used to her new situation, as much as she tried to. Hesitance. Pause. Smile.

“Yeah.” Rachel nodded. “Mr. Jefferson?” She guessed, feeling obligated to say his name aloud. The teacher who she had tried to avoid like the plague for months now responded with a smile and leaned over the desk on the opposite side.

“Correct.” His eyes sparkled with the reflection of the outside beams. “Would you mind some company, or you would prefer for me to leave you alone?”

Rachel blinked, surprised by a direct question. Despite Max’s reservation she heard a lot about Mark
Jefferson and none of those things were bad or repulsive. He was holding a reputation of an amazing
listener and somebody who tried to understand his students instead of scolding and correcting them.
However, they had never talked or even greeted each other while passing through Blackwell’s
hallways. His interest felt abnormal and intriguing at the same time.

“Depends on the company I guess.” She moved nervously, not sure what was expected of her.
Staying in the classroom during the party could cost her a visit in the principal’s office. Yet another
one this week. Well, damn it. She should join her friends anyway. “I’m sorry, I probably should
go…”

“No, no it’s fine. I was just about to grab a few things and I’m gone.” Jefferson stopped her with a
gesture but didn’t move himself. When she sat back, he stretched his legs watching her for a long
moment. There was something fascinating in the way this teacher was looking at her. Curiosity
mixed with a dominance and a bizarre kindness. “I’m not going to ask if everything is ok, but maybe
would you like to talk?”

He stunned her once again. Rachel wrapped herself in her arms, feeling naked and bizarrely
exposed. Her angel costume was quite provoking and the last thing she wanted was to encourage
any kind of invasion of her privacy. Verbal or not.

“About?” She murmured.

“About anything you want.” Jefferson shrugged and smiled gently. He really wanted to listen not
looking at her tits. What a surprise. “Sometimes it’s good to share your concerns and fears with
somebody you don’t really know. It’s less heavy and more insightful. A talk with a supposed
stranger can open a few doors but, on the contrary with a person who you know very well, doesn’t
burn any bridges. It gives you a different perspective, different taste, perhaps even a new beginning
or a solution you have never thought about before.”

She listened carefully, pondering on every sentence and thinking about how much she had missed
discussing issues in that kind of manner. When was the last time she had had a really perceptive
conversation, without breaking it with a kiss or some stupid shit?

“So, you’re assuming I do have a problem that requires a solution then?” Her question sounded like a
challenge, but she just wanted to keep the conversation going. Rachel didn’t expect him to stick
around for longer than a few minutes and it was really a pleasure to listen to his voice. She slowly
started to understand why half of the school was crazy about this guy.

Jefferson tilted his head and smiled one more time, still looking straight into her eyes.

“A girl dressed up as an angel, who hides in a dark classroom far away from her friends in the
middle of a Halloween party is usually in pain and doesn’t want to be seen by anybody in the worst
of her moments with her confidence in decay. A girl would expect to come back to the social blast
when she composes herself, but her state of mind doesn’t change. She struggles.” His fingers tapped
the wooden surface of the desk, marking his observation with a quiet staccato. “She suffers and stays
in the dark, hopeful that this is only a temporary moment of a crucial transformation. The darkness
doesn’t let young girls go so easily, despite of their struggles, internal or not.” His voice was peaceful
and comforting, filling the silence of the classroom perfectly. It matched the smell of old photos,
dusted cameras and the soft buzz of the halogen lights in the hallway.

Impressive.

“Interesting theory or should I say assumption.” She crossed her arms on her chest mirroring his
move. Was he trying to amaze her, charm her, or was it some kind of test? “I thought you were an art
teacher, not a counselor.” Rachel chuckled, breaking the eye contact for a moment. Chloe had been a very bad influence when it came to keeping her own opinion under wraps. Being incredibly direct became one of the flaws they shared. “My apologies. Too far?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, but visibly relaxed at the same time. Her bluntness was expected and appreciated. “Counselors or therapists are obligated to write reports and share their concerns with the responsible adult world, following the code of conduct. They are focused on disentangling a problem and moving onto another one. Being free from those requirements, I’m just a friend.” Seeing her frowning, Jefferson hesitated a moment. “Or, let me rephrase it – a person who cares.”

That got her attention. Rachel Price finally eased up and he knew that the wall of her self-defense was slowly falling. Hiding his smile wasn’t easy but acting in front of young girls was an art he mastered a long time ago. This… person was different though. Jefferson found himself intrigued as well. Maybe Nathan was right about her, maybe she really was something more or something else than just a potential object.

“Why do you care then?” She asked, and he knew his effort paid off.

“Because I’m an artist, an art teacher, not a counselor, as you’ve rightly noticed.” His arms opened slightly, showing that he had nothing to hide. “Care is in my nature, not in my job description. Do not worry, I’m not driven by dull curiosity, but with the need of discussing, transforming and touching the human nature.” He loved talking about his craft and passion, even if no one really understood the meaning behind his words.

Rachel took in a sharp breath and it almost got him worried. Jefferson had no idea how many times she had been through difficult conversations lately and how much she wanted to avoid yet another one.

“Touching those things can be dangerous, especially in the dark.” She responded, hunching a little, feeling stupid and ridiculous with her fake white wings on her back. Jefferson’s sight made her shiver and it wasn’t a pleasant feeling. Maybe Max was right, maybe she should really be careful.

“Would you be more comfortable with the lights on?”

Rachel shook her head.

“No, not really. I would be more comfortable being left untouched.” She added quietly, way more obedient than she wanted. However, deep down she knew this man was able to understand what she was going through and that made her scared and excited at the same time.

His eyebrow rose, and it took her a moment to get the double meaning of her last sentence. Rachel bit her lip, embarrassed. On the other hand, she was sitting in the dark room with a handsome, older stranger. It was her right to be concerned about an unwanted touch, physical or not. Especially when he was watching her again, trying to get through her own personal window, lurk inside and guess what she really wanted. Uncomfortable. New. Special.

Interesting.

“I understand. I didn’t want to put any pressure on you, please do not feel obligated.” Jefferson stood up slowly, apparently ready to walk off. “I will leave you alone then.” He hoped she would oppose, but if not, there would be plenty of other opportunities to learn more about Rachel Price. The opportunities were favorable tonight though. The girl seemed broken and lonely. Jefferson loved them broken.
“Wait…” She stopped him, acting against her own inner scream and along with his hopes. “Mr. Jefferson, yeah, I think I might like to talk a little.”

The trap was set, and it worked. It had always worked. He had to hide his smile again, sitting back this time way more casually. Rachel, still tense, relaxed a bit and even if troubled, let her smirk to appear. She could keep him busy for a moment or two longer.

“You can always stop and ask me to leave or leave yourself.” The disclaimer wasn’t necessary, so they both laughed shortly, glad to be done with official statements. Jefferson’s eyes sparkled once again when he adjusted his glasses. “Fine, let’s start with the basics. How was your day, Rachel?”

She was indeed very attractive, especially when she stopped hiding inside her own shoulders. Nathan, even if mistaken, had very good taste. Jefferson didn’t let himself to scrutinize her from head to toe, focusing on the hazel eyes only. If he was still in high school and interested in girls, Rachel Price would get his attention for sure, especially when dressed as an innocent angel.

“Ah, you know…” She winced, but then got serious not able to keep her game any longer. “Terrible…”

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“He doesn’t pick up.” Rachel dropped her phone, lurking at the displayed clock. They didn’t have much time since the Halloween party would start in a few hours and she wasn’t very keen on driving around town after sunset. Finding Frank Bowers became a hardship and they spent their whole afternoon trying to catch him or get any information about where he could hole up. Rachel expected to see him around Blackwell supplying her colleagues with the happy candies and the devil’s lettuce, but the infamous drug dealer decided to back off from this opportunity. Unusual, although everything about Frank Bowers was unusual lately.

Chloe scoffed and pressed on the gas, leaving Two Whales’ parking lot with the tires screeching. Her girl didn’t make a single comment, knowing how much her blue rebel missed the truck. Towing and fixing the car had eaten up all their savings although no price was too high to save the old pickup and put their life back on the well-known track. Rachel had no idea that the shrill and high-pitched noise of an old engine would sound so beautiful and soothing to her, finding herself more than happy with riding shotgun again. The thought that one day they would have to get rid of this car was heart-wrenching, even if it was time to look for a different vehicle. Some things would have to change despite their efforts.

Memories. So many amazing, scary and beautiful memories enchanted in this pile of rusty metal. Damn, she was sentimental after all.

“Let’s try the beach then.” Chloe murmured, speeding up to avoid stopping at the red light. They passed the intersection in the last moment.

Rachel nodded, trying to call him yet again. He had been begging for her attention for months and now all her attempts were ignored. Was it some kind of revenge or was Frank really that busy? It didn’t seem right to tap on his number over and over again, sitting next to her blue rebel. So many times, she had to hide her communication with Frank, lying to Chloe’s face and finding an excuse to respond to his texts. The relief that came with the fact that she didn’t have to keep it out her sight anymore got mixed with awkwardness and discomfiture.
The call didn’t get answered. Rachel sighed and hit the car door slightly. She was prepared to confront him, building up her courage and alacrity, and if they wouldn’t be able to find him today, the whole stress would be yet again pointless. Chloe peered at her, still focused on her reckless driving and the weird noise coming from the left front wheel. She could play though but was nervous as well. Way too nervous though.

“You really want to finish it today, don’t you?”

Rachel shrugged looking at her mobile and supposedly consumed by the notifications and text messages. There were plenty of both, but they couldn’t focus on the preparations, gatherings, costumes or trick-o-treating. The more they looked for him, the more tensed and edgy they got, knowing that the confrontation could be heavy with consequences and not quite safe. Rachel would prefer to face him alone, but Chloe wanted to be present, not willing to discuss any compromise. Their bravery was slowly fading though, and the blue pirate was hella close to calling off the whole search, even if it meant prolonging the inevitable.

“What better day than Halloween?” she finally answered, noticing how fast they were driving. The black and wet road become one smudgy line. “I want to be done with this fucking mess.”

“Me too, sunshine.” Chloe’s smile was weak and feeble. “Me too.”

They hit the exit and slowed down, getting into an uneven ground road. The truck whined with metal squeaks, but rammed the muddy ponds as requested. Chloe squinted her eyes, blinded by the orange rays of dying sunset and hissed sharply. Finally, they were in luck. Frank’s RV was parked in its usual spot, obnoxiously blocking the entrance to one of the wild beaches. She noticed a pretty decent Audi parked by its side so obviously he had a visitor. Damn, maybe it wasn’t the right time.

“I love you.” Chloe whispered, when they stopped, desperately trying to find enough bravery to get out and face him. The memories of Frank beating her up, attacking her with a knife, kicking with pure rage, hit her again, now dense with more details. She almost forgot how fast he was breathing, how much her back hurt, how loud the sound of ripped out leather was when he cut her jacket. Her body became sore in a snap of fingers, driven by a flash of thought.

Rachel watched her for a moment and then dragged her closer for a kiss. It was fast, impatient, served with cold lips, lacking longing and fire. Chloe held her close to her chest, not letting go, trying to comfort, selling a convenient lie that everything would be alright. She was way better at lying with her gestures than words though, and it almost worked as they both needed some dishonesty.

Cuddling in front of this old RV felt like stealing yet another calm moment before the storm, an act of thievery against nature.

“I love you, Rach.” The blue rebel repeated when she dragged her closer with a sharp and possessive move. Her girl surrendered to the gesture, hoping for an encouragement, but found herself even more uneasy. There was something desperate in the way Chloe breathed, touching her hair and holding her hand. Something oddly wrong too, because he was so damn fucking close now.

No one really wanted to leave this truck.

“I love you too, dork.” Rachel whispered, when her tattooed finger touched the blue pirate’s lips. “C’mon. Let’s get it done and then we can celebrate the whole fucking night.”

A promise was sealed with yet another kiss and Chloe finally opened the door, jumping on the white sand. The grains of soil got stuck to her shoes immediately, making her feel heavier, inept and clumsy. It was just sand on her cowboy boots though, nothing big, but in her mind, she was sinking to her knees.
Weird feeling.

“Wait, are you taking the gun?” Chloe frowned seeing her girl getting the weapon from the glove compartment and tucking it behind her belt at the back. She didn’t expect this old Remington to be in play today. Her stomach tied in a tight, unpleasant knot. “Why you, not me?”

Rachel, already expecting this question, sighed deeply and reached for her hand. The gun was forcing her to move slower and more awkwardly like an old, polite turtle. Being reasonable pushed them both to confront an outcast in the middle of nowhere with a weapon behind her belt. What a day.

“Because I’m the only one who knows the limitations of self-defense.” She explained, knowing the limits of Chloe’s patience as well. None of them expected Frank to go livid today but it was better to be safe than sorry. Not to mention, she stole a few bullets from David’s armory and this time the Magnum was loaded. It was against everything she had learned at her pre-law class, but she would prefer to stand trial than see her girl get beaten up again.

Reasonable thinking had its limits too.

They walked to the RV slowly, arm to arm, trying to pace their steps with the rhythm of the incoming waves. The smell of the ocean mixed with the seagulls’ song usually had a composing effect, but now every hint of reality seemed distracting. Chloe shifted her arms, annoyed by her jacket’s weight, and grasped Rachel’s hand firmly. Perhaps they really should turn back now, avoiding opening this can of worms. Her girl, hiding herself behind the gold waterfall of hair was torn with similar thoughts. She had started it and now both of them had to sort it out. Was this what marriage about? Asking your significant other to clean up her shit?

The short walk took them forever and every step was heavy with sand grains and worry.

The RV looked bigger and more inaccessible than ever before. The creased, metal sides seemed to grow with every second, raising to the size of a medieval defense wall around a cursed city. They felt so small and useless standing in front of the door and it took them a good minute to move forward.

Chloe knocked first. No response, no sound. Maybe he wasn’t home? How could he even call it a home? She banged on the door again, but still no answer. The metal moaned under yet another strike, groaned with a deep, hollow wail. Chloe didn’t even realize her fingers curled to fists, perfectly certain she was just knocking lightly. Something moved inside though, and the blue pirate frowned, trying to listen.

“Frank!” She heard Rachel yelling. “Frank, are you there?”

Chloe turned back about to ask her girl to keep quiet but then the door opened rapidly, and Frank Bowers appeared at the threshold, forcing them both to take a few steps back. Rachel gasped seeing his swollen cheeks, blood-shattered eyes and filthy clothes. Nothing was left from a man she had once known and let close. His tattoos glittered on his sweaty skin looking fake, like a phony drawing on a plastic wrap. The picture of the poker cards was mocking his luck, the black bird plotted how to peck on his throat, burning him down with a vivid, childish doodle of flames. The outline of a scar, sweepingly decorating his chest, was a derisive sign of all the honorable battles he had fought.

Nothing was left. Was it her fault too?

“Fucking hell, where did you two come from?” Frank stepped out, closing the door carefully. His guest inside couldn’t learn about this visit, couldn’t hear a word and hopefully wouldn’t grow concerned about a short break. It didn’t look suspicious though, he rarely invited anybody inside,
preferring to talk outside than to choke in the stuffiness of his vehicle.

Then his eyes met hers. Rachel was here.

His chest rose rapidly and then collapsed inside, with his hopes high and then crashed again. He snorted, briefly looking at Chloe but purposely ignoring her presence. His attention focused on the blond angel only and she was expected to speak. This blue trash could go fuck herself as far as he was concerned. Why did she even come here? It wasn’t her business.

Rachel. Was. Here.

“We’ve been looking for you.” Her hand disappeared in the grasp of Chloe’s fingers. It was hurtful for him to observe how close those two were. Frank still remembered the way she held his hand.

“You promised to set up a meeting and didn’t call back.”

“It’s not the right time.” He scratched his arm and then smoothened his shirt, desperately trying to look better than he was feeling. Not an easy task. “I will call you back another time. Now get lost.” He waved at them as if they were just two annoying flies, disturbing his peaceful and lazy evening. Seeing how Rachel took a step forward to protect her little punk friend almost got him angry. It wasn’t the right moment for that either.

“This is the time we have for you, ok?” Chloe hissed, lowering her head and not willing to accept any delay. Hiding behind her girl’s back was making her anxious. “Let’s set stuff straight here and now, Bowers.”

This kid, even if grown up a little, was still fucking stupid. Frank peered at the RV, concerned about how much his guest would be able to hear. The walls of his home weren’t that thick, and this encounter was more than unfortunate. They really should reschedule and discuss who would be involved in this argument in the future.

“What do you want?” His voice was low and raspy.

“Explain some things.” Rachel’s answer was spiced with a dare and well-hidden fright. It had been months since they had seen each other face to face, so close and so far away at the same time. First, Chloe, and then the rest of them straightened up, observing each other intensely. The ocean waves were counting the seconds of the challenging freeze, measuring time of an awkward silence. No one was willing to leave this beach entrance before sorting things out. One way or another.

It looked like a cheap western movie.

“And you had to bring Price with you to explain?” He scoffed and then gave up, walking aside, few feet away from his RV. They both followed him obediently, noticing how uneven his moves were. Frank wasn’t sober, he even forgot what this term meant. “Uh, ok. Just don’t you fucking yell.” They heard him murmur when they reached the tree line, standing a safe distance from his home on wheels.

“Oh alright.” Rachel wanted to cross her arms on her chest, but holding her wife was more important.

“Why did you attack Chloe, Frank? Why are you following us?” She desperately hoped not to discuss her past and focus only on coming to terms regarding the current situation. The past would be dragged out sooner or later though, they all knew it.

“Are you fucking stupid?” Her patient and calm tone of voice played on his nerves, pulled all the already damaged strings of anticipations. “You know why. You stole my shit and trashed my RV. I want my things back.” The planner was way more important than the photos or her letters though.
Without this thing Frank didn’t have any proof of who owned him money and who already paid their debts. All his contacts, plans, dealings and exchanges were noted there along with his whole life. He should remember those things, but since every day tasted like whisky and weed, his memory failed him greatly.

“I’ve never touched your fucking stuff!” Chloe burst out and took a step closer. This little punk really wanted a confrontation, wanted to pay him back for some fun they had last week in front of her house. Yapping little puppy. What was Rachel seeing in her?

Frank opened his mouth and then shut up instantly, reminding himself to stay quiet. Why the hell did they have to come here today? Why couldn’t they wait a day or two? This stupid punk trash was acting so innocent, playing Rachel like a fiddle. It was Chloe’s fault, no doubt about it. It was her fault that his lioness left him and now demanded some stupid answers. Bitch.

“Well, somebody did, and my shit is missing.” He stated as calmly as his annoyance let him, but then peered at Chloe and all his effort went to shit. “You are the only one who would get so fucking livid about it.” Her blue eyes opened widely, so he scoffed again, irritated by the school play. He had no intention to be part of their drama club rehearsal. “Oh, don’t you pretend, Price. I know you have it.”

A silent wheezing noise escaped Chloe’s lips when she clenched her teeth. The photos. Of course, he had to mention those nasty polaroids, and now he was smiling like taking those snapshots was his life achievement. It cost her a lot to stay in place.

“Wait, somebody trashed your RV?” Rachel frowned, reminding them both that she was still present.

Frank hid his hands in his pockets, rocking at his heels and bulking his cheeks with his tongue. The annoying smacking noise when he sucked on his broken teeth was distracting and loathsome, but he didn’t care if they would find him gross. So, Rachel didn’t know about the RV. Fucking Price didn’t tell her, keeping the outcome of her small revenge to herself and probably playing a victim of an unsuspected assault. Well, he didn’t expect anything less from this lying piece of shit.

“Yeah, stole my dog, my fucking stash and my notes.” The way he pronounced notes made Chloe’s blood boil. She hissed quietly and turned away not being able to even look at him now. This damn asshole didn’t seem bothered by the theatrical gesture referring only to Rachel. “Don’t tell me it wasn’t your girl-toy. You liked what you saw, Price?” He spat on the ground and smiled, now in need of her attention. “You liked it, huh?”

It was damn easy to provoke Chloe, especially when scared and jealous. “Fucking pig.” She burst out almost putting herself in trouble. Calling him names only widened Frank’s smile. Yap, yap, little doggy. That was all she could do.

“Stop, baby, stop!” Rachel stopped her in the last moment, sensing the jump before it happened. Her blue pirate struggled for a second but calmed herself down swiftly. Rachel touched her arm, showing that she understood the urge very well, but no fight could occur. The blue outburst got staved off for now, so it was time to put him in place. “Don’t you dare talk to Chloe like that.” She said, not even pretending to be objective in this brawl.

Fuck, she was still beautiful, even more than he remembered. Frank was watching her for a moment, recalling all the lazy smiles in the morning, all the stupid laughs and comments when she was drunk or high, the promises, the pleas, their small corner of time. If she asked him to come back, if she even mentioned a possibility, he would jump on it in a second. His sight got softened, but then he remembered about Chloe. One fucking blue, punk problem.
“Or what? I can talk to anybody how I want, without your fucking permission. Who do you think you are, Rachel?” Attacking her instead of Chloe was childish, but he couldn’t help it. “And, by the way, your little girlfriend just admitted breaking into my fucking car. You didn’t know, huh?”

Rachel really thought her trashy girlfriend was better than him. She really believed this Price shit would actually be a better option, protecting her as if she was some kind of treasure. Very well then. He was ready to break some hopes and dreams, as his were already broken.

“I didn’t do shit!” Chloe hissed loudly still being jailed in Rachel’s embrace. If her girl wasn’t here she would rip out his throat already. Civil, she had to be civil, but damn, she really wanted to see him suffer. “I wouldn’t touch your fucking pile of garbage with a ten-foot pole!”

It was getting louder. Frank moved nervously and looked back at his RV, hoping that the metal walls were thick enough to keep this conversation private. The beach was mercifully empty at this time of year and no Halloween celebrations were planned so far away from town. The privileges of living in Arcadia Bay. A lot of nothing.

“Chloe didn’t trash your car or steal your dog.” Rachel was reaching her limit of patience, but still managed to stay as calm as possible. Her hands started to shake a little though. “I would know, she was with me all the time.” She lied without a hesitation. “We got the notes and pics, correct, but got it from somebody else.”

“Who?” Frank frowned, believing her completely. He was always naïve when it came to her, continuously willing to trust her words.

She paused for a moment. It was a perfect opportunity to take revenge on Victoria, tell him the truth and watch Frank beat the shit out of her. Chase would shut up for the rest of the year if not longer, too busy to keep going with her own private war against them. A few months ago, nothing would stop Rachel Amber from saying her name. Now, it didn’t feel right to be that honest.

“Some Blackwell kid.” A shrug was always a good addition to a supposed truth making everything more truthful and less important. “They probably broke in trying to get some weed and took whatever they found.”

Frank got silent, pondering, absorbing the news. It made sense though. “Blackwell brats, huh?” He nodded, and Rachel sighed with a huge relief. No more blaming Chloe. They were getting somewhere. “Your reputation has to be high up now.” Making a biting remark was so unnecessary, but he felt entitled. The idea of Blackwell sharing and giggling over his own memories was a pin stack to his own conscience.

Chloe gasped and had to be stopped again.

“I don’t care about my reputation, Frank.” Blackwell’s horde could go fuck their selfies. Her status and name were destroyed regardless and even if it bothered Rachel a bit, she wouldn’t give him any satisfaction. “I just want you to know that we are not fucking responsible for it and taking it out on Chloe is not fucking right. Find the asshole who did it and do whatever you want with them. I don’t care. And when it comes to your notes and other stuff...” She shook her head, not willing to dwell on the awful photos. It was too hurtful for all of them, for all different reasons though. “We don’t have them anymore.” She added simply, turning back to compose herself, preparing for another skirmish.

The footsteps drawn behind them showed the sandy road they had to take to get here. It didn’t seem long, disguised in shallow holes in the ground, making the whole road less significant and silly. Just like kids playing on the beach, hoping to create something bigger and better from the trash and grains of land when it could be destroyed by a short, fast tide.
“Yeah? What did you do with them? Sell it to Hustler?” Another kid in the neighborhood, trying to kick down the sand castle and laugh at her face. Rachel bit her lip, rubbing her eyelids. It was getting dirty so quickly.

The waves of anger were hitting Chloe back and forth, and seeing her girl so upset, she forgot how to walk on eggshells. Dancing on embers was more her thing.

“I’m gonna fucking kill you!” She broke in a scream, feeling so freaking useless. This asshole, this damn dickhead hurt her girl, had taken her away, destroying their world piece by piece and the only payback she could get was just a simple, stupid yell. It was so not fair. So not fucking right.

“Chloe! Please baby, let me talk. I beg of you.” Rachel was the only reason why they still kept trying to talk and communicate like normal people. She stroked Chloe’s cheek using all her charm to keep her blue rebel sane, showing that nothing mattered, nothing except them together. He couldn’t do anything; her fingers were saying. He was just an obstacle, an obstruction. A thing to deal with, hardly a problem.

Seeing them together was a pure torture for Frank Bowers. His nostrils exploded with a sudden exhale, changing him into a raging bull.

“Woof, woof. Triggered much? I’m so fucking scared. Ready for round two, Price? Want some more? I can give you a shitload more.” A naked blade appeared in his hand out of nowhere. He turned the knife around his fingers and waved at her, inviting for a dance. Might be deadly this time, who cared. “C’mon, come to daddy.”

He thought she wouldn’t be able to refuse such a welcoming invitation, but Rachel stepped in front of Chloe, covering her and putting herself in the middle. Two raging dogs barking, and herself being locked down in a cage between the bare fangs was the last thing she wanted. It was the last resort Rachel was afraid of and pretty much predicted while driving here.

“If you want to get to her, you have to go through me.” She pointed at him, feeling how heavy the gun got behind her belt, cooling her back with the oiled metal. “Back off, Frank. I’m serious.”

“Through you?” The blade trembled in his hand. “Why do you even care? She can’t even tie her shoelaces without calling for help. Why do you want this useless piece of shit instead…?”

Rachel heard so many times people talking shit about Chloe, calling her names, pushing her away or simply patronizing her, looking down on her pirate. She watched her blue treasure accepting it or ignoring completely, usually affected anyway afterwards, with her confidence sinking and a senseless anger growing. First Wells, then her parents, teachers, some college assholes, now him for a good measure. No one was allowed to speak to Chloe in that manner. No one. Especially this poor, disgusting piece of trash.

“Stop talking about Chloe like that!” She yelled, losing her endurance entirely. “She is…” A soft gasp wasn’t enough to stop the words flowing. “She’s my wife! Do you hear me? Don’t you fucking dare!”

Her blue rebel blinked surprised by the statement, not expecting to be brought up in this confrontation. She felt proud and lost at the same time, damn pleased it had been said and anxious about the consequences. It was more than obvious this fucking asshole still had some feelings for her girl and provoking him with a marriage certificate didn’t seem wise. If Rachel hoped to throw Frank off though, she couldn’t be more mistaken.

“A wife? You’re fucking kidding me.” He laughed loudly, completely forgetting about being quiet.
“You got married? You married Chloe Price? This is fucking ridiculous. Fucking teenagers, fucking drama queens.” Those two kids looked like they accomplished something special, something extraordinary. He knew about one thing that was special and was totally forgotten on the way. It was time to remind her of what she had missed, what was really important. “What about us, Rachel, huh? What about the thing we had?” His hand gestured between them, as trying to find the last string of connection.

What did Chloe have that he didn’t? They were both stripped from any chance for a decent future, outlasted and ignored by others, but at least he could provide. He could protect her, taking care of her and her issues. Chloe had nothing to offer except her sad, poor self, always in trouble and with no connections. She was younger and maybe cute when she didn’t act like an airhead but nothing to Rachel’s standards. Useless piece of shit, waste of time, a fucking problem deserving to die in an old dirty bathroom. Why would Rachel be serious about this commitment?

“There is no ‘us.’” Her words poisoned him more than he had expected. “There was no ‘us’ from the get-go.”

Now it was Chloe’s time to smirk, when she surrounded Rachel with her arm, showing that nothing would break them apart. So full of herself, she didn’t even have a fucking dick. Fuck that shit, it was way too much to bear.

“Yeah, tell yourself that. You can tell her what you want to keep her in place, but we both know better, Rachel.” He ignored Chloe intentionally again, trying to imagine she was just a sad, nasty dream. It was only between the two of them. Frank and Rachel. Him and her, like the old times. “My father was always saying it’s a bad thing to lie in a marriage.”

“I’m not lying. You were just a mistake, Frank.” She despised him, really detested his existence despite everything he had done for her. “One, big, fucking, sad, terrible mistake.”

“I saved your life, you dumb bitch!” He yelled, suddenly realizing he was close to tears. She was just a kid for fuck’s sake, a high school girl, nothing more. He was almost twice her age, it shouldn’t bother him at all. The vicious grin was forced, but he had to smile. Breaking down wasn’t an option, not in front of those spoiled brats.

“And you took a big piece of it in return. We’re square!” They would never be square, they would never be free of this stupid guilt and the pain that it caused. It was time to end it, but Rachel wanted him to suffer. She needed to hurt him somehow, wipe out this annoying semi-sober smirk out of his face once and for all. “I want you to give me back my bracelet.”

Oh, this really got to him. Frank stopped smiling.

“Your bracelet? Why? She made you to ask for it?” Even Chloe took a step back seeing how angry he had gotten. “You need to give her some wedding gift? Buy her a fucking dildo. You gave it to me! You promised it will be fucking mine!”

“I promised you a lot of things and so did you.” Rachel got so close to his face that he could smell her perfumes. Jasmine and white amber. He had missed this smell. “I want it back. You have no right…”

It was a struggle not to push her back or just slap her. He had killed for her. He had taken a blood oath, depriving himself off a good friend, of his risking everything he had worked for, just for one blond fucking kid. The bracelet was given to him voluntarily was his only memory, the last reason to stay stable. A proof that it wasn’t just a dream, his own imagination but that the thing between them really happened. He was going crazy already, trying to fix his life, himself, and without this little blue
piece of trash it would be way harder.

Rachel had taken so much already, all his hopes included.

“I have all the right! I don’t care how much you lied to me or you think you lied. This bracelet is mine now. You two took my notes, my photos, fucking everything. This shit stays here, alright? I don’t give a fuck what you want, Rachel. Not anymore. You two can both go fuck yourselves.” He waved at them with his knife still in his hand. “Together or not, I don’t care!”

“You lied to me about Sera!” Rachel shouted and backed off a little, surprised by her own bravery.

“What?” He blinked, not sure what she was referring to. The red Audi glittered in the red sunlight, winking at him and reminding about who was its owner.

“You lied to me that you are not in touch with her and you have no idea where she is now!” Chloe’s hands got rejected, since Rachel was way too angry to accept any kind of tender touch. She didn’t care if it would make him smile again or not. No care whatsoever. “There were notes about your meetings and your phone calls in your planner. You knew what she was up to. You knew where she was the whole time! I asked you…” She ran her fingers through her hair. “I begged you so many fucking times for any kind of a fucking clue!”

Frank seemed untouched by her sudden outburst, playing with his knife and chewing on his own saliva. A little boy amusing himself with his toy, scolded and put in place, but not feeling guilty of his deeds, waiting for the firestorm to pass.

“It was for your own good.” He shrugged finally, not willing to give her any more insight.

Rachel took a step back, so tired of this conversation. Not sure why she even decided to talk about her biological mother, she sought a shelter in Chloe’s arms. It was provided, although it didn’t taste as safe as usual. Her blue pirate kissed her head, rocking her slowly, but the need of being part of this fight was stronger than keeping calm.

“Oh yeah?” she said belligerently. “So, you could fuck both of them over, huh? Sera would fucking kill you if she knew! She would rip your head off and you know it very well! When I talked to her and she asked me…” Chloe cut herself off, realizing that Rachel had no idea about her last conversation between her and Sera. Maybe she wouldn’t notice, maybe…

“You what?” Rachel’s eyes grew bigger when she looked at her in shock and surprise. She took a few steps back, then turned to Frank, then back to her again. Chloe took a deep breath, cursing her ability to speak altogether.

“Ha, so she didn’t tell you that thing too, right?” Frank’s leer was filled with victory. “Well, look at the damn perfect girl, not so damn perfect anymore. My contacts with Sera are strictly business. Import export, if you follow me, and some shit your dear daddy was putting on us. Your precious Chloe on the other hand, talked to your mommy before she left town the last time. Yeah, she did.” He nodded and laughed out loud, more than content. Who knew that this particular topic would give him an advantage? “And Sera asked her very nicely not to tell you how much your own father tried to fuck us over. You know why? Because she cared. What did Chloe do? She came back and spilled the beans, because you can’t trust her with one fucking single thing. And Sera had to fucking leave, fucking run away. Thank your wifey for it, Rachel, not me. Thank her.”

Rachel didn’t take a single look at Frank when he was talking, watching Chloe getting more nervous and scared. The blue pirate bit her lip, breathing faster with every word spoken, not able to deny the accusations. Damn, she had told Rachel the truth, explaining how James wanted to hurt Sera,
including how he hired the criminals and plotted the trap at the old mill. The details about how she had obtained this knowledge were never discussed though. Her girl wasn’t even sixteen then, recovering from a serious surgery and the information she had gotten almost broke her in half. Chloe had never had the chance to talk about the details, how Sera asked her to keep it a secret, how everything played out and how she had spent hours being unconscious and useless on the wooden floor of the secret punk club. Everything had happened so fast then, and when they started to see each other after, Rachel never wanted to come back to those times, moving on with her life and supposedly forgetting about her estranged mother. No questions had been asked, no answers were sought so it didn’t seem relevant, insightful or needed to get back to. Chloe had gladly disremembered about the whole drama, focusing on her daily struggles and happy times, not willing to talk about it either. Frank had known though, and now was using it as leverage to break them, tear them apart.

“Is that true?” Rachel asked sharply.

“I will explain.” Chloe rose her hands slowly in a defensive gesture.

The hazel eyes were watching her, with the flames burning high. Rachel was always surrounding herself with a wall of fury, but deep down she was genuinely hurt. This information wasn’t relevant at any point, just a snap of the past, forgotten on the way, but brought up now felt like a planned treason.

“You will. You fucking will.” It wasn’t the right time to press Chloe and yell about how much she just got damaged. Rachel turned back to Frank, locked in the middle, between two people she had been connected to and tricked by. No one here was honest. No one was truthful. Everybody lied, no exceptions. “My bracelet, Frank. Now!”

Another shrug and a spat on the ground was her only answer. Frank couldn’t care less about her demands. Now, victorious in his shenanigans and pleased with the outcome, he was the one to dictate the terms and set up conditions.

“I don’t have it on me.” He answered simply, showing that both wrists were naked.

The blue rebel couldn’t stand the tension, the look on Rachel’s face, Frank’s triumphant smirk, the exasperating sound of the waves crashing on the shore, her own shoes filled with sand and dust. Every passing second was like a kick to her stomach, a painful squeeze of her guts. She had to do something. Something probably stupid.

“She said now!” She pushed him back, almost throwing him off balance. If the red Audi wasn’t in his way, Frank would fall to his knees or even kiss the mud of the road.

“Stupid bitch!” He hissed, reminding her that the knife was still in his hand. Was she looking for trouble? Fuck it, she was already there.

“Chloe!” The words stopped the blue rebel in place, but Rachel knew that her girl was driven up the wall. Yes, she was upset as hell by the revelations, but wouldn’t allow her blue pirate to sacrifice herself in return. Frank was waiting for it, he really needed to punch Chloe in the face today and Rachel wasn’t willing to allow it. Jesus Christ, it would end up with a battle and bloodshed. On the other hand, if Frank dared to even look at Chloe the way he kept watching her now, she would lose it way faster. He wanted a fight? Rachel would give them one. “If you ever touch my wife again, if you ever try to threaten her or anybody who we are connected to...” The gun behind her belt got heavier.

“Then what?” He sneered.
“Then I will kill you.” Rachel said very, very slowly. She wasn’t joking, even if a killing wasn’t on her bucket list. There were better ways to make him suffer, to make him disappear, than cold-blooded murder.

“Kill me?” A loud chuckle cut the weird, salty silence. “Are you serious? Jesus, what a joke. I’m done with you two. With both of you. You were just a waste of my time. You weren’t even worth it.”

“I just want my bracelet and we are done here. Forever. I’m not gonna come back, I won’t speak to you ever again. There is nothing left between us. I don’t love you, I’ve never loved you and never will.” The calm speech was quickly losing its pace. Rachel was holding way too much inside. “There was only one person I loved, and you knew it from the very beginning. It was and is Chloe.” He had to fucking understand one simple truth. At least one. “Always Chloe!”

Her blue pirate was staying calm, almost withdrawn from the conversation, playing with her keys and placing each one of them between her fingers. Her fist started to look like an absurd hedgehog but somehow it calmed her down, keeping her busy without murdering some fucked-up drug dealers. Hearing the love confession should be comforting and empowering, but it made Chloe feel even more guilty. Rachel caught her lying and was still protecting her, fighting for them both like a damn lion. The blue rebel wondered if she would be that fierce after learning about some dishonesty. Well, damn, she hadn’t been. Yet another reason to feel down and unworthy.

“Always Chloe, always Chloe.” Frank mocked her words and then he pointed at the blue pirate. “She was always part of your problem! Jesus fucking Christ. Just look at her. She lied to you too!”

“But I didn’t fucking rape her, you fucking asshole!” The blue eyes got pitch black with fury, as Chloe pushed her girl aside, but then looked at Rachel and seeing how much it upset her, she stayed in place.

Rape. Rachel got dizzy, almost felt like fainting. Oh god, she said it. Chloe named it, said the word, established it, writing it in stone. A term that Rachel wasn’t able to force herself to pronounce, even think about, wiping it out of her mind, removing from every known dictionary. Her girl just yelled it, making it true, forcing them all to confront it, discuss, and fuck, even dig deeper. A slap in the face. A betrayal. The truth. A treason.

“Rape?” What a stupid assumption. Frank grinned even more seeing how much they both got triggered. “She wanted it, trust me. She really wanted it.”

“No!” Rachel’s screamed.

The time choked.

Chloe jumped forward and hit him in the face swinging widely. Her fist, armed with the steel pillars of keys ravaged his face when she rammed him down. He was bigger and heavier, but she caught him by surprise and Frank lost his balance, dropping his knife and stumbling on the wet mound of sand. They both fell to the ground, wrestling in the sticky ground and mud, but it wasn’t enough for the blue rebel. Frank wheezed then grunted but was way too drunk to react fast and prevent the next blow. Climbing on top of him, Chloe was hitting him again and again, embarrassed angry, desperate and livid. Seeing his face becoming less human, transforming into a red pulp of flesh by her own blood-splattered fingers only fueled her anger but then Frank howled and hit her in the head, throwing her off and reaching for his knife. Rachel kicked the blade in the last moment, not sure if it was time to reach for the gun or wait a tad longer. She was shaking like in a fever, feverishly trying to stop it and keep it going at the same time. Seeing her girl ready for another rapid attack, Rachel quickly grabbed her by her waist again, trying to prevent a more profound outbreak of the blue fury. Chloe
hissed and struggled, trying to break free and she had to pull her closer with all her strength to keep her in place. Frank looked at them, marking the sand with a bloody spat and was about to get up, when an unfamiliar voice froze them all in place.

“You did what to my daughter?”

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“I just… I didn’t want to talk to you ever again. When Steph sent me this message saying you two bailed out just to tie the knot… I couldn’t believe that you didn’t tell me. No message, no single phone call.” Max’s smirk was filled with sadness, stuffed with dismays and desolation. She rested her forehead on the locker’s cold metal surface, already exhausted by the disagreement that did not yet happen. It was a nice refreshing compress to her skin burning like a fever. “Nothing. Like I didn’t exist.”

Her confession didn’t slash the silence in half, keeping it untouched, even more dense.

Chloe took off her pirate hat, running her fingers through her long blue hair and leaned on the bench stretching her legs, trying to make herself somewhat comfortable. The long frock coat, heavy with embroiders, was making it harder and the long pocket flaps were always in the way. She didn’t pay that much attention to the Halloween celebrations although felt obligated to fit in and be part of the colorful crowd. Her pirate costume was very limited though. Except for the hat, the coat and the plastic sword, Chloe Price was dressed up as her own self, showing off how much she didn’t care about this tomfoolery and how everything about it was just a joke.

“I’m sorry. I never planned to do it that way.” She murmured, putting her hat back on. A guilt trip from Max was the last thing she needed today but couldn’t miss the opportunity to sort things out. The little freckle was avoiding her for a few days prior and it was the first time since they had gotten back from Portland that Chloe was able to talk to her in private. The swimming pool locker room wasn’t the perfect place but a way better choice than the swarmed and clogged dorms. It was hard to find a space for a peaceful talk nowadays.

“Was it some kind of revenge?” Max turned back to her, hitting the metal door by accident. The loud steel thumb splashed around in a weird chlorine echo and then evaporated in a stench of dirty sports bag and old sweat. The locker room was empty and dark, creating a soothing barrier between them, not forcing to look at each other. Max remembered very well when they had broken in here the last time, trying to impress one another and rebuild whatever was left out of the ruins of their friendship. This time, no criminal activities were needed to get inside. Pretending was always part of their game though.

Always playing pirates. One way or another.

“A revenge? For what?” Chloe frowned.

“For five years of not getting back to you?” They never really talked about it, never touched this surface, afraid of throwing a rock into the water and seeing the circles widening. Maybe a splash was needed. “For staying silent and leaving you alone with your problems and grief?”

The glittering light of the fake waves of the swimming pool danced between them in a blue reflection on the tiled floor. It might’ve been her imagination, but the blue flashes moved faster as she spoke.
Chloe did not move though, respecting the phony sea and the detachment created by it. Distance was important, even if painful.

“Of course not!” The blue pirate, now a fearless captain, opened her arms widely, a little offended by this assumption. Getting back to her misery and missing Max like crazy wasn’t up for discussion though. “Don’t you even start. We’ve been there, done that, it’s solved. I wanted to call you, but it felt fucked up to just tell you that way. First, I didn’t know what to do, and then it was too late.”

Max turned away from her, not willing to take yet another semi-innocent smile or oblivious gaze. Seeing Chloe in her pirate costume was even more aching. It reminded her so much of the their past thick with all the promises and jokes when they had spent so much time together. Good old days.

“And you didn’t think about calling me when you didn’t know what to do, right? That would be the first thing I would do.” She whispered, a little bit afraid that her voice would get lost among the murmur of the pool’s waters. Funny, how loud the waves could get when sealed down in a small, marble space. “Call my friend.”

“First thing you would do?” Chloe winced and shook her head. “You always hide so much shit, Max. It’s a fucking hardship to get anything out of you.” Attacking her friend wasn’t a good idea and the blue pirate didn’t want to start a hurting contest, although it was hard to take those suggestions with a straight face. It happened, she had explained herself, it was time to move on.

Sail away.

“With me, it’s different.” The shrug of the little freckled shoulders was almost invisible. “When it comes to you… I knew about Frank, I knew that Rachel did some stupid shit. I knew about everything. You really didn’t have to talk much. I would be there for you…”

“I needed my time alone.” Chloe cut her off harshly. “I needed to fucking digest it.”

To be perfectly honest she had thought about calling her, asking to meet her at the beach requesting support or just calming silence. This idea had been appearing and disappearing in the chaos of her mind that night and got forgotten at the end unintentionally. After the decision had been made about what to do next, meeting Max would be risky. Too risky. Distracting.

It really hurt her though. Her little freckle got really upset, but the fact that Chloe didn’t share a word, never even bothered to text a single message. Yet another person wounded by her choices and the things she didn’t say. Would it ever end? First Rachel, then Max, not to mention other people who felt attacked only by her existence. The blue pirate lowered her head.

“Are you really my friend, Chloe?” The quiet question was truly a painful blow. “Are you?” Her tone was soft and gentle, far away from a painful sob, but Chloe suspected that a lot of tears were shed when the question was formed.

“What the fuck, Max…” She huddled on the bench and felt the hilt of her sword punching her in the stomach. It was so uneasy to be a pirate. “You know I am!”

Their relations hadn’t been easy since Max came back to Arcadia. First, the infamous five years of no connection, then a sudden change and finding each other anew, dealing with some unclear feelings and wishes unspoken. Not much in common was left from the times when they were kids, but Chloe still tried to save it, cherishing every moment with Max, trying to understand her better, learn again. It wasn’t easy by any means and now, got even more complicated.

“I’m not so sure anymore.” Max crossed her hands on her chest, caressing her shoulders. Solace
delivered by her own fondle, the only tender gesture she could expect. Pat, pat, little Max., It would be okay. She didn’t dress up tonight, not willing to celebrate any horrors or engage in any preparations. Her daily outfit was always a costume anyway. Max Caulfield, the sane and the responsible. Max Caulfield, not troubled and always willing to help. Max Caulfield, the smiling freckle, an open book without a single secret hidden. She didn’t have to pretend to be anyone else since her whole life was one big drama stage. “I don’t think you care.”

“I do care.” Chloe grazed her knuckles, stretching her fingers after grasping the bench’s wooden edge for so long. “It was just a f***ed-up situation, ok? Max, I love you, you are my best friend. I do care. Really.” Why was it so hard for her freckle to believe in it? “It was shitty that I bailed on you, I know. I should’ve known that you would react badly because of Kelly and all that shit, but me and Rachel…”

The celebration outside snuck in rapidly by a partly open window when the student horde started their parade howling and yelling in excitement. Chloe hoped Rachel was part of the crowd having some decent fun, but on the other hand she would feel left out if that was the case. Wherever her wife was, she was probably in way more comfortable position than her blue rebel. Metaphorically speaking or not.

“Yeah, you and Rachel.” Max sneered, suddenly empowered by the clamor of Blackwell’s mob. “Always you and Rachel. Where are we in this, Chloe? We, like you and me?” It was tempting to hide behind the black and emerald shadows, leaving the question in the air, let it flow and disappear. It was too late though. It had been said, carved in white coated tiles.

“What do you mean?” Chloe wanted to stand up, but it would look too defensive. Shifting her position would have to suffice. “Rachel is my girlfriend, my wife now. You are my best friend. First mate.”

“Degraded to the second mate now.” Her friend shrugged again and walked a few steps on the side.

It was a dangerous territory, a land never fully explored, and Chloe didn’t have enough patience stored to be careful or gentle, especially after everything that had happened today. If her friend wanted to go there, explore this weird thing between them, she could give her the ride, but not a nice one for sure. The gentle journey had reached its limits along with her candor.

“What’s your deal, Max?” She snapped. “What do you want to say?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t you ever start with this ‘bros before hoes’ shit.” The blue pirate stood up, rubbing her fingers. Her fist still hurt after hitting Frank’s face, beating him over and over, marking him with his own blood. A bittersweet triumph, meaningless victory. “It’s because you and Steph?”

“No.”

Chloe walked closer, crossing the undeclared border between them. Entering this space could be risky for both of them, but she was tired of being careful and the things she hadn’t said in time. Maybe it wasn’t the right moment, but Chloe Price didn’t want to be careful. Staying silent cost her way too much.

“Is it some weird jealousy thing going on, huh?” She asked, closing her eyes. The memory of Rachel’s face, her shocking wince, the nervous quiver of her shoulders, appeared underneath her eyelids as soon as Chloe shot the world down. The murmurs of today’s afternoons were pretty loud, almost as ostentatious as the waves of the swimming pool.
“Don’t you even start.” Regardless of the implication, Max didn’t want to go that route. Not now anyway. “We’ve been there, done that, it’s solved.”

“Fine.” Chloe retracted, slowly walking back to her bench. “If you know me as well as you claim, you should know I wouldn’t be able to just cry you a river because I just found out about my girlfriend being a fucking porn star.” The privileges of being part of Rachel’s life was to become overly dramatic. “What would you say to me if I told you what I wanted to do? What would be your advice if I showed you the fucking pictures, the notes she sent him and told you that I want to marry her? Now?”

“I would suggest rethinking it.” Max’s eyebrow rose gently.

“Exactly.” Chloe pointed at her. “I didn’t want to rethink it, overthink it or think at all.” She didn’t yell but the locker room decided for her, multiplying her words and making them stronger. A captain without a route, a pirate without guidance. It wasn’t the light the blue rebel wanted to present herself in though.

Her little freckle rolled her eyes.

“That’s your problem, Chloe.” She responded. “You don’t fucking think! You just leave everybody hanging because of Rachel, nothing else matters, just fucking her!”

“Because nothing else matters!” The scream resonated loudly among the walls, bounced off the cemented floors, whirled on the blue, glittering reflection. Chloe opened her arms once again, ready for an outburst, a retaliation or a sneery response. Rachel was on top of her disordered pyramid of priorities and shadowed everything and everybody else. It wasn’t fair. It might not be right, but that was the only way she could find a sense in this mess called life. Like a blue, pirate cannonball shot into a certain direction, crushing everything in its way. No questions, no sidetracks. One goal.

Rachel.

Max was patiently waiting for the water to calm down after the biggest of the rock was thrown, waking up the uneven circles. It took a necessary pile of seconds for them both to compose themselves, adjust the pirate hat, move back and forth, adjust.

“So why doesn’t she want to talk to you at all today, Chloe?” Max asked and smiled sadly once again.

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“Sera, wait in the car, I… Oh, fuck.” Frank sat down seeing a gun in her grasp. The other hand was taken by a cigarette. A person who he had called ‘friend’ for years, risked his life for, gone through hell and back, was nonchalantly taking a drag of smoke and pulling back the hammer, aiming her revolver directly at him. He tried to breathe out, choking on his own blood, and looked at Chloe, absurdly hoping for an intervention. The blue rebel, still heated by the rapid fight, was watching them both with her eyes wide open. Rachel, who was standing behind her was shocked as well.

Time slowed down, closing them both in a glass cabinet of shock and wonder. Even Frank didn’t expect this confrontation to end in that kind of manner.

“I’m done with waiting.” Sera seemed untouched by the whole commotion; calm, serene and
astonishingly not even surprised. “And listening. Is it true?” She asked, looking at the girls who
didn’t move an inch, observing her with their jaws dropped.

“Which part?” Chloe murmured quietly, slowly coming back to life. She straightened up, dusting off
her pants and slowly moved closely to Rachel, trying embrace her, wrap her with the blue shoulders,
but her girl didn’t even notice. Enchanted in human stone, the blond angel was trying to stop the wild
train of her thoughts, not certain if she was dreaming or her biological mother was really standing in
front of her. With a gun. Loaded gun.

Two flames of the same fire.

Rachel’s hand went to her back, checking if her Remington was still in place. She didn’t want to
drag out the weapon but feeling the cold steel of the barrel reminded her that she wasn’t dreaming.
So, it was true. Sera was here. Her mother. Sera. Damn, those fucking terms, Chloe hugged her
firmer, trying to protect or just show how much she cared. Rachel didn’t need another proof, she just
got one. Frank’s face was the best example.

Jesus, what a fucking mess.

Sera Gearhardt hadn’t changed much since the blue rebel had seen her last. The way she moved,
feeding on her smoke, narrowing her eyes and shaking off the blond hair from her face was so
similar to the gestures Chloe was seeing every single day. It was so obvious from whom Rachel
inherited the wild, eager smirk, the way she was wrinkling her nose, or how much her eyes were
burning. It was her origin, older, more experienced, and way more dangerous. Her roots. Her
mother. The comparison had never been made though, since mother and daughter had never met
before, not in their adult lives anyway.

“Sera?” Rachel shook her head, pretty sure her eyes were deceiving her, and totally ignoring Frank,
who was hoping for one single look. “Is that… Is that you? You… Came back?”

Hearing her voice so close was a surprise. The fact that the words were directed to her, cost Sera a
nervous smirk. She rose her eyebrows, trying to explain the reason behind her visit, but it was a long
story and not very important. Hopes for even seeing Rachel hadn’t been high and them meeting was
a pure accident; regarding everything she had heard, a very fortunate one though.

“Rachel. I’m sorry we... had to meet like this.” She started slowly, feeling so unprepared and
anxious. Then the gun got aimed at Frank once again. “Sit. Don’t you move.” This bastard would
pay his price, she would make sure of it. “Don’t you worry about him, he won’t be bothering you
anymore.” It felt good to help with this issue at least.

Bowers went pale and moved around like an old, beaten-up dog. He had been involved in canine
fights, he had seen those poor animals kicked down and bleeding, asking for a final blow to their
heads, ending their struggle. Frank had ended a few lives himself, and now his own ferocity was
paying him back. Wiping the red streams of blood from his face, he lifted his hands slowly, meaning
no harm but not giving up. One pull of a trigger, one bullet, and no surrenders would be necessary.
Frank Bowers wanted to live though, even if the purpose of his existence wasn’t clear even to
himself.

“Are you gonna kill him?” Chloe was the only one to say it aloud. A sign of total bluntness or
absolute obliviousness. Always the first to speak. That’s how Sera remembered her.

“I don’t know yet.” Rachel’s mother tilted her head, still preferring to look at Frank than at her own
daughter. She wasn’t ready for that sight, only peering at the girls secretly from time to time. “I’m
really tempted though.” The gun was getting heavier, so was the air. “You two got married?”
“Yeah, last week.” The blue pirate nodded, hugging Rachel closer, but her girl was still unresponsive, reacting to her touch like a rag doll. One, small, tensed question mark, scarcely breathing.

“I knew you were something special when I saw you last time.” Sera’s lips trembled when she smiled lightly. “I guess Rachel thinks so too.” It was a soft encouragement for her daughter to say something, but it didn’t make any effect.

Chloe waited for a second for her girl to confirm, but her anticipation wasn’t rewarded either.

“Yeah.” She finally produced some kind of reaction, wondering if it would be appropriate to kiss Rachel’s forehead. Her wife, now so tense, didn’t oppose any kind of gesture, not showing any appreciation either. Chloe felt lost.

“I think you should leave now.” Sera chuckled lightly. “I have to talk to Bowers. Alone.” Frank’s face tensed hearing those words. The abyss of the metal barrel was looking at him intensely. Sera wasn’t bothered by his fears though, she had her own dreads to deal with. “I will leave town in a few days, but I would really like to meet you again if you... want to.” She suggested calmly and letting herself to look at Rachel.

Chloe swallowed hard, as her hand started to burn with bruises willing to support her angel with any decision, although Rachel was in a different world now. She had been wondering for so many years how their first meeting would look like, when and how it would happen, what would be her first words, first questions. Her biological mother hadn’t occupied her thoughts though, showing up in them unexpectedly and then disappearing like a light turned on and off as if in a prank of mischief. Those wishes had never been shared, even with her blue pirate, never discussed, and now when it happened she found herself exposed and unrehearsed.


“I…” Rachel stuttered. “I have to think about it.”

It was for the best not to make any rapid promises. She hoped her mother wouldn’t get offended or didn’t expect anything more. Chloe was holding her so desperately close it was hard to breathe. Rachel slowly dragged out her own gun, since it was poking her back the whole damn time. Now they looked even more similar. Two guns, sides of the same coin, accompanied by one drug dealer and a scared blue pirate.

Halloween in its prime.

“I understand,” Sera said, not insulted or even upset. At least it seemed so. “And Rachel…” She really shouldn’t keep them here longer but wanted to hear her voice once again. Maybe even for the last time.

“Yes?” Their eyes meet for the first time today. The first time in years, to be perfectly clear.

“It was good to see you.”

“It was good to see you too… mom.” Rachel responded slowly and followed Chloe to the truck, not turning back.

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“My past caught up with me today. Chloe and I…” She wasn’t sure if Jefferson knew who the blue pirate was and how they were connected. Rachel corrected herself swiftly. “I mean, my wife and I, went to talk some sense into my ex. We had some problems with that poor bastard lately since my ex found a new astonishing hobby which is stalking us both.” Adding labels to people she had interacted with seemed unnatural and weird. It was always Frank and Chloe, no additional terms needed, but now telling the story to somebody else, she had to give them more common roles. Bowers was her ex, even if this phrase didn’t include even half of the problems and torments he caused and represented. Her blue treasure locked in a pirate chest called ‘wife’ also was more than that, even if the term was obviously correct. Was that the different perfective Jefferson was talking about? The described situation certainly felt less personal.

The crowd outside was still surging, gushing and raving, ready for a bonfire. The first red sparks got blasted away, making the students cheer and yell loudly. Blackwell witches and wizards were ready to burn down their horrors, eat some candy and get ready for the long and rainy winter.

“Not a convenient interest.” Jefferson’s voice brought her back, reminding that she wasn’t still a part of the gathering, jailed in the shadows. This conversation was taking too long, but Rachel enjoyed every second of it.

And he still didn’t look at her tits. That was nice.

“Not at all, especially if pushed to the extreme. I wanted to go alone though, but Chloe obviously didn’t want me to. I respected her wishes, but I should’ve presumed it wasn’t a good idea. Chloe…” Rachel sighed deeply walking back to her table, still wrapped in her own arms. “She hates my ex’s guts and I can’t really blame her. They started a fight and if not for a surprising intervention it would end drastically.” Seeing her blue treasure getting livid to the point that she almost killed the bastard, scared Rachel as hell. Chloe, her own private teddy bear, was able to show a tremendous amount of brutality and was eager enough to be unleashed, provoked only by a few words. It should make the blond angel feel safe and protected but seeing this outburst of violent fury scared her. The blue pirate would never raise a hand on her of course, although knowing she was able to beat up somebody so severely was troubling.

Yet another thing troubling.

“If you were walking in her shoes it would end more than drastically.” Jefferson didn’t seem touched by the revelation. Actually, Chloe just gained some respect in his eyes. Fascinating, how far this punk allowed herself to go in her rage. Fascinating.

“It probably would.” Rachel scoffed, pretty sure her own eruption would include a deadly outcome. Frank deserved way more, not just a few scratches. “My ex did terrible things in my name and to me though. Chloe also sacrificed a lot but never reached the point of no return. She just wanted to protect me, but I felt put in the middle instead.” Her lipstick got smeared when she bit her lip. Wiping the leftovers from her mouth marked her fingers in red.

Two vicious dogs barking, biting, howling. Her fault.

“Don’t blame yourself for their fire or getting addicted to your flame.” Jefferson invited her with a gesture to sit down in front of him. Reading Rachel was getting harder when she was strolling around, straining her words way too carefully. The story of an object imprisoned between two predators was captivating though. He wanted to listen to more. “Chloe’s will to protect you is natural, regarding the strong bond you both share. Your ex obviously is striving for a similar connection, replacing it with anger and aggression. No fault of yours in humans being humans. Not to mention that terrible things change people, transform them, forcing them to sidetrack or just get put on a different life path. Whatever we do or even plan, influences us despite our stubborn obduracy,
on the contrary to our intentions.”

She was pondering his words for a moment, trying to read between the lines, outsmart him even, find the weak chain of the passage.

“You think my ex wants to change?” she asked.

It didn’t impress him, but the fact that Rachel tried to understand his hidden agenda was somehow charming and adorable. Her ex was just a dog, ready to be euthanized, removed from her life forever. Obviously, this girl didn’t have enough resources of experience to deal with that kind of situation and Mark Jefferson wasn’t willing to help her in that case. Her story amused him though, broke the routine of a bleak waiting for another transformation or art to complete.

“I mean that people are pushing themselves to accomplish a drastic deed for the sake of keeping their status quo untouched.” He explained, retracing a little. She wanted an insight, here was one. “They are forcing themselves to save their own, well-known world, turning it upside down at the same time. Whatever Chloe or your ex did, their intention was to save themselves for you, not to disappoint you. Saving you means saving themselves.”

He saved himself so many times, loving the feeling of another rebirth. She would never understand though, unable to grasp the high level of humanity. Just a whore dressed up as an angel. They all were just whores.

“Perhaps, but it doesn’t justify the actions.” She couldn’t read his mind, but caught his gaze, getting colder, and rubbed her arms to warm herself up with her own fire.

Jefferson snorted quietly. Oh, those young human beings, taking justice as peremptory.

“It doesn’t, but jealousy is a powerful force, almost as prevailing as greed.” This Chloe girl was probably driven by pure envy, no doubt about it. Same with the other one. Girls like Rachel had that effect on others. “She seems dangerous though. You should be more careful.”

Her eyebrow almost reached the line of blond hair.


“Your ex.” He clarified.

Rachel almost laughed.

“Ah, no.” So, he thought she went through a cat fight. Two girls fighting over her would be still unpleasant, but not as dangerous though. “It’s a guy actually.” It was really interesting how the whole school, faculty included, quickly embraced the fact that she was gay. Those labels got even more uncomfortable, even if correct.

He bowed his head in a courteous manner. “I apologize for my hasty assumption.”

“The assumption was on point; that relationship was a mistake.” There was no reason to disabuse him, creating a false image of herself. Rachel didn’t really want to pretend, feeling oddly liberated while talking to him. It was really helping. “It ended before it started but he doesn’t want to acknowledge it and leave us alone.”

She expected a few wary or cautious questions, but Jefferson wasn’t interested in her sexual experiences and love life. That was new too. Everybody who Rachel knew would jump on the opportunity and grill her for every single detail. This teacher had a completely different approach.
And attitude.

“He is just afraid of loneliness, even more profound in the light of the things he had done. Aren’t we all at fault in this?” He smiled lightly scratching his beard.

Interesting. She was way more thought-provoking than he had assumed. It wasn’t a typical hunt or boring conversation with a potential object, dwelling on high school problems. This… person could really listen and enjoyed being heard. At least to some extent.

“You think I should forgive him?” Her question was disappointing. Mark Jefferson sighed deeply, hoping it was just a mistake, not a pattern of the way she was thinking. Rachel Price seemed lost and in need of a mentor. Showing her a path didn’t mean pushing her on it. An act of transformation had to be voluntary.

“I’m offering a different perspective, not an advice.” He stated resolutely. “An advice is a choice of the weakest. Understanding is for the strong ones who want to forge their own path. Moreover, a cognizance can be a powerful weapon, if you know what your enemy is afraid of, or a prevailing leverage if you want to make peace with them. Forgiving, however…” He cut himself off for a moment thinking. “Forgiving is a choice though.”

“And sometimes…” Rachel looked at the bonfire’s flames eagerly licking the dark firmament. Was Chloe part of the crowd there? Was she there? “And sometimes an impossibility.”

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She touched her knuckles, then squeezed them lightly. The pain was still resonating inside, but slowly fading, leaving her only with a few ugly scars. At first, Chloe thought her hand’s bones got fractured, but thankfully it wasn’t the case. Frank was more sore and wounded for sure. Inside and out. Damn right, at least some justice was served.

“Rachel and I... We had a very intense day. Including Frank. And Sera. Yeah, well don’t look at me like that, I had some shit going on. Happy?” She blurted out, still watching the celebrations outside through the small, half-open window. A bunch of werewolves were trying to fight one terribly dressed up bigfoot, amazing the rest of the crowd. Poor bastard thought he could take them by himself, getting more and more aggressive. The other monsters would show him his place soon enough. “That’s my secret for today. So, what’s up between Steph and you, Max? What’s going on?”

Her friend rubbed her temples, resting on the bench. They switched places automatically like it was planned. One had to sit when the other stood up. The unwritten rule of tonight’s talk.

“Literally nothing,” Max whispered, noticing how hard it was to get back to this subject. “A decay. A break, like she said. Some pleasant way of saying that we won’t be an item anymore.”

“Bullshit.” Chloe shook her head, still massaging her hand. “You can still get back together.”

The assumption wasn’t cheerful, but it included way more hope than Max would allow herself to carry. The last time they had talked at the same place, she was assuring her as well of how much Rachel still wanted to fix things between them, how everything would get solved smoothly. The hopes hadn’t been high then either, but the little freckle was way more aware of their situation. Chloe had needed this support so badly, falling apart piece by piece. It wasn’t wise to feed on a false hope
now though. It was better to just forget. To move on.

Somehow.

“I crossed the line. She doesn’t trust me and is way too tired of putting up with my shit.” Even mentioning Steph’s name was difficult. She. She. Her. That was the only way Max could refer to her, hoping it would get easier with time, but it happened to be quite the opposite. They didn’t talk, didn’t cross paths, didn’t even look at each other, still meeting from time to time but keeping their distance. The first rule of a high school break-up was to act like there hadn’t been anything between them and never would be. Calling it off, erasing it all, even if the memories and recalls were killing them both.

She missed her so much.

“Trust issues are my major, Maximus Prime.” Obviously, Chloe had way more faith than she. “Rachel crossed the line too. With me. So many fucking times, in the worst possible way, and I still love her. Even more now than before, and I will never ever stop loving her.” Expressing her dedication always felt awkward in front of Max, even if it was supposed to be helpful. “Steph wants you back, she just needs some time.”

Her freckled friend shifted slowly on the bench, playing with her hoodie’s zipper. She knew their story, being part of their rebound from the get-go and hearing how the other couple succeeded didn’t do her any good. Rachel and her best friend could work things out, but their dynamic and passion for each other were different. Maybe their love was deeper, maybe their passion more profound, maybe they were just luckier. There was nothing similar between them and Max and her now ex-girlfriend.

“I don’t think this parallel works here, Chloe.” She murmured, getting slightly jealous. It wasn’t about her best friend being taken, now damn married. Although, she and Rachel would be able to fall asleep together tonight while she had to get back to empty and cold sheets. Alone.

“Do you love her?” Chloe asked with her eyes still filled with hope. Damn, naïve blue pirate. “Do you still love her?”

“Does it matter? She is done with me. You hear me?” Surprisingly she got annoyed, and then even angry. Chloe Price giving her advice, what a plot twist. “She is done, moved forward and doesn’t give a flying fuck.” Even if Steph really gave one, she would never express it, too honorable and too proud to walk into this river yet again.

Outside, the werewolves got the bigfoot and started to tear apart his costume. No one was really helping the big guy, assuming he would be strong enough to defend himself. He was still fighting, grunting and yelling, but it only made people laugh lauder. It was a pleasure for the whole school to watch too. Free entertainment.

“That’s so not true.” Her friend frowned, getting away from the window. She had seen enough.

“Oh, like you know what’s true or not.” Max snapped, feeling like they were discussing two completely diverse things. Two different conversations enchanted in one. “I don’t know what to do with myself, Chloe. I feel so goddamn alone. Why does everybody in my life let me down? My girlfriend broke up with me, my parents bail on me for years and don’t give a shit, Kate runs back home, Kelly goes missing...” She pulled the zipper up and down in a nervous gesture. Zip, zip, zip. “Now you betrayed me...”

“Listen!” Chloe hit the window sill and hissed, both in pain and irritation. “No one betrayed you!”
The screams outside got even louder, while the horde became more cheerful and encouraging, contrasting with the stillness in the locker room. All those people were enjoying this poor guy’s misery more than their own merriments. Fucking school, fucking town, always up somebody’s ass.

“Bullshit.” Max stood up, walking fast to the swimming pool area. “Who hasn’t? Fuck it. Fuck everybody!” She stormed out the door, slamming it forcefully.

Surprised by the sudden outburst, Chloe ran after her, almost slipping on the wet floor. Max walked fast by the pool’s edge armed to her teeth with her apprehension, not caring about the pirate chase. It was hurtful to listen to her friend bragging about her amazing marriage, even if rich with flaws and shortcomings. Discussing things about Steph and opening up was harder. There was more to it though, tons and tons more. Everything between was one big sea of misconceptions, assumptions, and confusions. It wasn’t only Chloe, only them, their damaged relations. It was just her whole reality, drowning in the chlorinated waters of the swimming pool, dragging her down, watching her sink. One big festivity of skeletons, laughing in their closet, with their teeth clattering in a mocking laugh.

“Hey, you have to chill, dude.” Chloe grabbed her arm stopping her in place and almost slipping again. “I know you are pissed off at me, I deserved it, but you have to stop rejecting every single fucking helping hand! You always have to do everything by yourself. Your way or the highway!” Why did the little freckle have to be so stubborn? “No one can live like that! No one! Rachel tried, and it fucking destroyed her. It’s always you who saves the world, Max. Who’s gonna save you?”

“You think you can?” She tried to wrestle her way out, but Chloe didn’t let her go so easily. The blue pirate was pretty much used to people doubting her social skills and ability to help others, but this time she decided to stand her ground, ignoring the harsh tone. Max was upset, fine, but she needed assistance with her fight against her own demons. Call her friend, she said, so be it. Who would be better than Chloe?

“I’m even overqualified.” The blue rebel narrowed her eyes, blinded by the water’s reflection. “I slipped, alright, but we’ll work it out.”

“Yeah, like how?” Max finally broke free but didn’t run away. Damn, she really wanted to get the hell out this place. “Rewinding time?” She sneered, playing with her zipper again. Up and down, exposed and decent. The deer on her t-shirt was making an appearance every other second.

“No!” Chloe scoffed, raising her hands in a heated gesture. “Working things out like fucking normal people. We will fix your shit, figure stuff out. Let me help you, please. Please…” She switched from raging to begging now. “I know Steph loves you very, very much. She is just heartbroken and lost, dude.”

Seeing her so persistent was hella unusual. Max tilted her head, biting her lip, willing to believe her but still insecure. Chloe was terrible at fixing shit. Well, maybe except cars but this skill was also questionable.

“Yeah?” She snorted. “How do you know?”

“Because I was also heartbroken and lost after Rachel left me. Yeah, you know how fucking much.” Max saved her then, helped her with drinking, establishing what was right and what was wrong again. Chloe didn’t want to see her friend taking even a slightly similar route. “You can give up, sure. It might be easier, just to find another girl or even a dude. Whatever floats your boat.” She rolled her eyes. “Or you can work your ass off and fight for the important thing. It’s worth it. Maybe instead of saving Kelly or other shit, start with yourself this time?”
Max attacking her was only increasing her annoyance. Her friend was apparently barking up the wrong tree, desperately trying to stay in her well-known shadows. Chloe didn’t give a crap about the missing girl or Kate coming back home. Yes, it was unfortunate. Yes, it sucked, but Max had to learn how to let things go.

“Myself? I…” Her childhood friend stumbled, trying to remember when was the last time that she actually allowed herself to be selfish.

Chloe turned around and then looked back at her with pure, raw determination.

“What? Why do you have to cover your shit with some kinky mission you’re up to? Figure out your things first! Aren’t you worth saving, huh? Why do you always sacrifice everything in the name of bullshit? What’s wrong with you, Max?” She almost wanted to punch her. “What’s wrong with you girls always thinking so fucking low of yourselves?” Her thoughts went to Rachel, so lost and confused, still blaming herself for what had happened with Frank. Now her best friend, despite all the odds, decided to walk down the same road. What was wrong with them? Was it Arcadia Bay’s charm? Was it Blackwell? Seeing Max disturbed to that extent, feeling unworthy, upset and questioning her own value was truly heart wrenching.

The little freckle didn’t take her words very well, turning back, then stepping aside, close to covering her ears and drowning in her own misery instead. It was harsh, it was merciless and damn fucking honest. Chloe had been in one relationship in her life. One! And now she was acting like a marriage expert.

“And look who’s talking now.” She rejected an attempted hug. “Chloe Price, the definition of low self-esteem! Besides, everybody thinks that I’m just this crazy weirdo. Maybe I am! Maybe I don’t fucking deserve to be saved!”

The whole school was talking behind her back. Max had seen them looking at her, smirking and whispering when she was walking down the hallway. They were avoiding her, mocking or bored out of their minds, not willing to even be around her. She felt like an outcast and not in a rebellious and defiant way like Chloe. Just one sad kid, that no one noticed unless there was some school urge to bully and show her that they were better, high-class and superior.

Maybe they were right. Maybe she wasn’t worth it.

The blue pirate shook her head lighting up a cig and ignoring all the red signs warning her not to do it. The taste of the cig was infected by the stench of the swimming pool, making the smoke not enjoyable at all. It was more of a habit than actually a pleasure, but it helped her to calm down.

“You were right about one thing, Max.” The inhale was deep, tapping off the ash nervously.

“What?” Her friend winced and hunched, ready for another harsh turn of some truth exchanged. Chloe adjusted her hat, brushing off the blue hair from her forehead and winked at her with a bold, pirate smile. “Fuck everybody.” She scoffed and reached for her hand, this time hoping no refusal would occur.

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This Halloween party sucked. Victoria Chase spent literally the whole evening to look gorgeous and
literally no one paid enough attention to her. She received a few pleasing comments and caught a
decent amount of interested looks, but way less than expected. The makeup was just perfect, her
hairdresser outdid herself this time and the costume wasn’t cheap either, even if uncomfortable. If
Blackwell was holding a contest for the best outfit, she would win for sure. Too bad they dropped
this tradition a few years ago after too many people were complaining of an unfair judgment. Of
course, it was damn fucking fair. Victoria Chase won almost every time.

Unless Rachel Amber had taken an effort to participate.

She didn’t want to think about this bitch again, not anytime soon. Every time Victoria tried to
actually get some justice and find something on the infamous fallen queen, it turned out badly.
Amber was still with Price and damn happy, while she had to deal with Nathan and the whole drama
behind their recent “operation Bowers.” She still didn’t know how to talk to her friend, if she should
have, and if he was even somebody who she could still call by that term. Fortunately, he was
avoiding her as well, absorbed by some stupid art project with Jefferson. She noticed him briefly
today, talking to half-drunk Juliet in the cafeteria. The girl was almost completely out of it and he
was still pouring her more booze. Nathan had never been good friends with this drama club slut
though, and tonight he was all charming and sweet, humming this famous tune from “The Sound of
Music” to her ears. Was it some kid of personal revenge or something? Victoria would never get
jealous of Juliet, it was just ridiculous.

Her Queen Marie Antoinette dress was really beautiful, although going to the bathroom was really a
hardship. She had no idea how those people had been wearing that kind of stuff and dealing with
their chores on a daily basis. Thankfully for her, it was only for one evening and she could change
into something way comfier soon enough. After she would be complemented properly of course.

She was about the leave the restroom, almost done with her preparation, annoyed by the number of
layers, underwires, and lace, when the door opened, and her infamous rival walked in. Victoria
sighed deeply, not in the mood for another catfight, but if the prey strolled into her lair she had no
other option. She had some reputation to live up to.

“Rachel Amber, what a surprise.” Oh, of course, this bitch didn’t have any problem with her own
outfit, since it was barely covering the intimate parts. A sultry angel costume fit her perfectly and
Rachel was stealing all the hearts and boners today flaunting her beauty.

Slut.

The blonde bitch didn’t even care to shrug, walking straight to the mirror and starting to adjust her
makeup. She was apparently dancing a lot today, enjoying the attention brought by the lack of any
dignity and her eyeliner was in need of an improvement. Leaning over the sink she opened her purse
and started to work on her pretty face carefully. The white wings were in her way the whole time
and she scoffed a few times, not being able to move freely.

“Long time no see, Victoria.” Rachel pouted her lips totally focused on drawing the precise lines.
“And it’s not Amber anymore, didn’t you get the note? It has to be sad to be left out and not
informed about the important events.” She double checked if the symmetry was maintained and
dragged out her mascara not willing to leave the bathroom anytime soon.

“This change wasn’t significant enough for me to pay that much attention to it.” Victoria crossed her
arms on her chest, not in a very royally way. “I heard about your little escapade and shotgun gay
wedding though. Should I congratulate or pity you both?”

Rachel peered at her, scrutinizing from her high pinned up hair, through the expensive pink dress,
heavy with jewelry and decorations, to the shoes, not fitting the historical period. Somebody really
wanted to show off their royal power here. Majestic and pathetic at the same time.

“The best kind of gay wedding and the congratulations are entirely voluntary. Don’t force yourself, Tori. I’m sure Chloe and I will survive without your wedding gift.” She winked and got back to her own reflection.

Victoria opened her mouth ready to criticize how much the dragon tattoo on Rachel’s calf didn’t fit her outfit at all but the whole semi-innocent look was a huge mockery anyway. The only reason people paid that much attention to her tonight was the fact that they could almost see her ass under the very short white skirt. Price had to go nuts, barking on people all the time and protecting her wifey. The blue trash was famous for her jealousy.

“I believe I’ve already given you one.” Victoria rose her chin, not willing to surrender. “Didn’t you get the note?”

The hazel eyes sparkled under the tone of makeup.

“I did, quite literally. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. It was actually the best thing that could’ve happened.” Rachel was apparently done with her eyelashes, not almost fully focused on the conversation. “Chloe was always wondering about this case and because of you, we could clear things up.”

Victoria chuckled, not sure if the gratitude was really that honest. Nothing was really sincere about Rachel as she had learned last week. Her curiosity was almost killing her with all the unasked questions, but she knew Amber, oh sorry, Price, wouldn’t answer any of those. Her imagination would have to suffice when it came to their confrontation about the photos and notes, stashed and preserved by Frank Bowers. She really hoped Rachel had a very bad day because of them. Like a really fucking terrible one.

“Happy to help.” She answered proudly. “If I ever stumble over any of your naked photos ever again, I will make sure Chloe gets a copy.”

It would be so easy to strangle Victoria Chase to death right now. They were here alone, everybody was outside or too busy. She discovered Frank’s little secret and now thought it entitled her to be the biggest bitch ever. This little pathetic queen could wear any dress she wanted but if she decided to start attacking them again, Rachel would show her who was the real royal here. With pleasure.

“I don’t really think it would happen, but of course, you are free to do so. How did you get it, though?” She frowned a little, still smiling and now reaching for her lipstick. “I can’t believe you broke into a certain RV by yourself.”

The pink satin rustled noisily when Victoria moved in place and then leaned against the wall. A beautifully decorated fan appeared in her hand, but she was still not sure if putting it in use would be a sign of weakness or pride. Damn, she should’ve read some more about her favorite queen’s customs while preparing to dress up as her. The need of showing off one of her accessories was too strong though, so she started to wave herself slowly.

“Oh Rachel, you know I don’t reveal my secrets so easily.” Victoria narrowed her eyes. “Although, your assumption is correct. I would never be involved in such criminal activity. I got it from somebody else, and since we’re into an interrogation mode I hope you don’t mind me asking, but did you get married because of the planner I gave Chloe?” Her curiosity won the battle over carefulness. “Was your punk girlfriend so desperate to keep you for herself that she put a ring on your finger so fast?”
Rachel rolled her eyes, shaking her head and letting her hair to cover her shoulders with a splash of gold. At least something was covering them this time, and it was a pure satisfaction to see how much she struggled with her locks being tangled between the wings’ feathers. Victoria felt way more dressed than she wanted with her decency being protected to some extreme level. Next year she should really wear something sexier though. Not to the extent her sworn enemy presented tonight of course.

“Oh Tori, you know it’s not true.” Obviously, Rachel had to deny the suggestion. Of course. Lie as much as you want, bitch. “She doesn’t need a ring to keep me for herself since it’s granted. We’ve been together for over three years, it was about time.”

This excuse was cheap, no one really wanted to get married in high school, regardless of the seniority of their relationships. The whole school was wondering what pushed them to tie the knot, gossiping left and right like a bunch of nasty crickets. Pregnancy couldn’t be the reason, they had been already living together anyway and their families were more or less accepting. Why Amber became Price was one big Blackwell mystery. Victoria knew her charming explanations were just bullshit though.

“Three years with a small break I would assume.” Victoria was watching her fixing her eye shadow. It apparently required a lot of work and thoughtful care. Damn Rachel, a fake, plastic girl, who relied more on her makeup skill than natural beauty. The Blackwell queen was damn certain that the hazel eyes didn’t look so good when she was waking up or with her face dried clean. That was probably why she decided to spend her life with Price. This pothead wouldn’t be able to see the difference even if her life was depending on it.

“With a small break and no more breaks planned as you can see.” The blonde angel waved her hand showing off her wedding band and smiled wildly once again, relaxed and actually amused by this brawl. The fashion snake wanted to break her thunder so hard and was failing with every attempt. Thank the Lord for those small favors.

Chase was chewing on her words for a moment and, judging by her impression, they tasted like last year’s smores.

“Well, congrats, Rachel. I hope you will live happily ever after. Although, I have to say I’m disappointed in you.” Victoria sighed dramatically, trying to wave herself with the fan in a sophisticated manner. “Tattooed wedding bands are so out of style and lacking a minimal sense of class. What would happen if you decide to take another, more permanent break?”

Rachel was so tempted to roll her eyes one more time, but it would be a slight overkill. She should be grateful that the whole school didn’t start talking about her affair with Bowers and play it right just in case. Victoria could always spill the beans, to be quite literal, and make her life more difficult. The blonde angel was pretending she didn’t care but deep down knew it would be fucking hurtful, especially for her blue pirate wife. People were talking behind her back since she had remembered but Chloe could go freaking livid hearing that kind of gossip, especially supported by some hard evidence. Her telling people what really had occurred would be even worse.

“I really don’t see it happening and I actually find our wedding bands cute and hella fitting.” She shrugged and changed the gears of the conversation, swiftly aiming at her enemy’s weakest point. “Don’t worry Victoria, your time will come one day, but I already feel for the poor bastard who will propose to you. I’m sure I won’t be around to see it happening though.”

Victoria winced, aware of the fact that her being single was yet another favorite topic of the heated discussions among the fellow students. No one seemed to be worthy her attention though and she wasn’t keen on selling herself short only to show that she could seduce anybody she wanted. People
were usually assuming that she and Nathan had some kind of open relationship and she went along with it, not confirming or denying, leaving it up for interpretation. Rachel knew it was bullshit though.

“I don’t think so either.” She adjusted her pink dress straightening up a little. This costume was not only uncomfortable but quite heavy as well. “Don’t worry about my future, Rachel, focus on the present. I’m surprised you had the guts to show up in tonight though, especially dressed up as an innocent angel. You won’t convince anybody about your purity, Rachel. Blackwell knows.”

The reputation of the blonde slut had been ruined months ago anyway when the school security found some drugs in her backpack. Dropping out, then coming out with Chloe didn’t help much, although a large group of her colleagues appreciated the fact that Rachel was able to get back on track, both personally and academically. They knew she was involved with a lot of shitty stuff and it was a curse and advantage at the same time. She could really dress up as whoever she wanted, and no one would give a single fuck. High school didn’t work that way.

To be frank, Rachel didn’t like her outfit at all. It was planned weeks ago, when she had ordered some pieces of it on Amazon and eBay, hoping to surprise Chloe and invite her to some dirty cosplay later. Her idea went to shit a few hours prior and Rachel wasn’t much in the mood for wearing anything except her ordinary clothes. The whole preparation for the Halloween party was fast, hasty, and done in silence when she occupied the bathroom trying to avoid her blue rebel. The angelic look was just an excuse to have some time alone.

“I don’t think you grasp the idea of Halloween, Tori. If everybody was about to show their real nature, you would have to dress up as a mean and ugly, old hag.” She finally decided her makeup was perfect. One last look in the mirror and she was ready to go. “Good thing it ain’t a must.”

This battle was won without much effort at all but now she was in need to recharge, get some piece of mind. Damn, maybe one of the classrooms would be open and she could bunker there, far away from all the questions and the stupid talks. Avoiding Chloe was difficult enough, being constantly asked about her wedding, annoying as hell, and now Victoria Chase, her pink shitty your highness, forced her to face her yet again.

“You ain’t an angel, Rachel.” The fashion snake stopped her with the last final hiss.

“And you ain’t a queen, Tori. You’ll never be one.” She winked playfully one more time, passing Blackwell’s version of Marie Antoinette and walking out of the bathroom.

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She was watching him in silence, tilting her head and pondering, not used to opening up so quickly. Jefferson knew this sight very well, had experienced it many times and was aware that the only thing that would help right now was patience. Rachel was wondering how much she could trust him, how much to reveal without risking being judged. He didn’t know her well but presumed that she would either go for all or nothing. This girl was a risky player and for her own sake should never be involved in any kind of gambling.

He kept his poker face without a single effort.

“I met my mother today.” She said finally, adjusting her dangling wings once again and staining her
white ribbon with fingerprints of red lipstick. “For the first time in years. We didn’t really speak much but she saved me from a very uncomfortable situation. I’m still not certain if she was a God sent or another complication.” Mentioning a gun, two guns to be exact, a bloody fight and drug dealing business wasn’t something she was prepared to share. Even honesty had its limits, but Rachel didn’t want to lie hoping for a thought-provoking input. Trustworthiness was a game anyway, she should keep something for later to bribe his interest if she needed to talk to Jefferson again. Chloe wasn’t a patient player. The teacher knew his game well though.

Those damn, freaking wings.

“I was under the impression that you are in touch with your family.”

Parents were usually the biggest problem for high school students. Jefferson wasn’t surprised that she was distressed by that issue as well. Hopefully, she wouldn’t dwell on it for long since it was probably the most boring topic of them all. A man could hope though.

“It wasn’t my father’s wife.” Everything was in her school files anyway. She wasn’t sharing anything top-secret. Realizing it gave Rachel the courage to continue more freely. “I met my biological mother. I was adopted. Partly.”

This was hitting close to home and Jefferson found himself even more attentive. Was it the reason why Nathan wanted to connect with this girl so badly? Did they talk about this issue, shared their doubts and fears? Perhaps his protégé knew more about her than he wanted to reveal. Young Prescott trying to keep anything away from his mentor would be a reason to get him punished, having his boundaries tested once again. Jefferson didn’t want to wonder about Nathan though, more absorbed into Rachel’s story.

“And she wants to meet you again?” He formed his response as a question, pretending the answer wasn’t so obviously clear.

Her wings jerked when she lifted her head rapidly. Poor, little dove, stripped from her power to fly. “How do you know?”

It was time to put up an act, add some spice, pretend. The truth tasted better if supported with a similar confession. A trade, a transaction of genuineness in disguise. He had to give her something in return, not afraid of sharing his life story. It didn’t matter though. Those things had happened a long time ago and to a different person. Mark Jefferson had changed so much since then that sharing glimpses of his past seemed like the summary of a fictional, tragic novel. A review of somebody’s else case. A movie that had never been made.

“I would say that you are not the only one who has an estranged mother.” He rubbed the tops of his fingers, lowering his sight and trying to look shy or even unsure. It was serious gambling right now, a blank bluff and Rachel might not fall for it, seeing it through. Object or not, she was smart, too clever for her own good.

“Are you talking from your personal experience?” Even if she suspected dishonesty, she went for it. Not as ingenious as he assumed or just striving too much to keep it going. Either way, he got what he wanted.

Mark Jefferson smiled.

“Perhaps. Some girls hide in the shadows, afraid of the outcome and prolonging the wait for the upcoming confrontation. Some young boys hide in their dorms to avoid meeting their mothers, afraid of what they would be burdened with. One particular boy especially.” His tone of voice left no
uncertainties as to whom he was referring to. “Parents, who are supposed to be the closest people to us, can have many faces and you never know which one they would allow themselves to show. Women, who gave birth, are supposed to be loved and adored by their children, and so we are forced to interact with them despite our reservations since the society requires us to do so. We blame ourselves for refusing the obligation. The guilt that comes with it is enforced as well.”

When his mother had visited him at the Blackwell dorms almost two decades ago, he didn’t know what to believe either. First hesitant, then angry, then curious, he went to meet her with his childish expectations high. Blackwell had transformed him, awakening his desires and helping to build his goals, and so he had hoped she had gone through a similar change. Their encounter couldn’t have gone any worse, to be honest. First, she was all apologetic and patient, then demanded respect with words and gestures, ordering him around as if he was her property, a human real estate. There was nothing innocent or pure about her, no beauty inside or out, just a filth of her life, straining him, making him foul and unclean. He remained untouched looking at the mortal wreck, a bundle of nerves and burdens, eaten alive by her own troubles, a thing that helped to create him, and he felt simply nothing. She was just a shell that he had to crash to break free, just like a butterfly was obligated to destroy its cocoon.

It wasn’t easy to straighten his wings.

The kid who had met his mother was dead though. Young Mark Jefferson, with his hopes and dreams, had experienced a short and painless death during this encounter. He had to pass away though, too weak and too unsure to deserve an existence. The first step of rebirth was to acknowledge the transformation and go through the process. His mother had done a splendid job in this matter, unintentionally showing him the right way. He was grateful for this step, even if taking it was disturbing at first.

“Did the boy meet his mother then?” Rachel broke in, cutting his thoughts in half.

“He did.” Jefferson nodded.

“Why? To avoid the guilt?” Her pose, the way she was covering herself with her arms, playing with her earring and smiling shyly was screaming innocence, but he wasn’t deceived. There was nothing innocent about Rachel Price either, nothing alluring for him or tempting enough to plan any kind of transformation. A waste of a good material, but not a waste of time.

“No.” Mark Jefferson stated firmly. “The boy was a free spirit, not bending to the will of the others.” His eyes got darker, almost as black as the shadows in the classroom’s corner. “He met her to understand. And then to make a choice.”

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Victoria ignored her existence, strolling through the crowd in her super weird dress. Brooke, yet another freaking princess, this time Leia from Star Wars, just shrugged at her questions. Courtney, now something between a hooker and a kitty, was too drunk to answer. It wasn’t getting easier, damn it. Chloe frowned, seeing Juliet being led by Nathan and barely standing on her own two feet, hoping that the drama club girl would give her some hints. Apparently, she decided to party hard tonight. Good for her, bad for Chloe. Young Prescott was acting like a decent human being for once, taking care of Juliet; what a change. She shrugged and plunged into the crowd looking around
carefully. This day was sponsored by the letter ‘S’ for “search” since she had spent her morning trying to find the phone number of the drama club to borrow her costume, then emptied her truck’s tank driving around chasing Frank Bowers, and now trying to spot Rachel or Max. Either or, preferably not together.

The crowd swayed left and right to the rhythm of the music, preparing for the bonfire, yelling and screaming, spilling drinks and burning each other with lit cigarettes. It was a hardship to go through this mosh pit, but Chloe had a lot of experience in that matter. Trained well, she felt like a Navy Seal on a mission, wading through the swarming ocean of people. Max was nowhere to be seen though, not surprising since the dance floor was one of her least favorite places. Rachel, usually enjoying it more than everybody else, wasn’t present as well. Where the hell did all the women go?

She had noticed a familiar figure bustling around the sound mixers and sighed deeply. Maybe at least one more case could be closed tonight without much effort. She would prefer to talk to Steph after confronting Max, but the fates decided for her, forcing them to meet here and now. Fine. Let’s do it.

“Steph, wait!” She yelled to break through the noise and, seeing her friend turning back and walking away, she intensified her effort to break through the wall of sweaty bodies. “Wait a minute, please!”

“What do you want, Chloe?” Gandalf the gay, unsurprisingly dressed up as a wizard, with a handmade staff and some decent face paint, winced seeing her approaching. Chloe, even if she enjoyed playing DnD, had no idea who Steph wanted to pretend to be tonight, but she looked remarkable regardless. Spectacular and sad though, maybe a little bit wasted.

“Just talk, alright?” The blue pirate opened her arms hoping for a friendly hug. Ok, no hug. “I know it was tense and…”

“If it’s about Max, I don’t want to hear it.” Oh yes, Steph was hammered, way too drunk to play with this sound mixer. She relied more on her trained moves than paying attention, almost done for tonight anyway. “If it’s about your wedding, I’m not interested either.”

Mikey and Drew, both dressed up as knights, appeared by her side like an ancient security service. Chloe grimaced seeing their tense pose, surprised that Steph required protection, especially from her, and that the brothers were willing to bar her way if needed. You shall not pass. The blue pirate scoffed.

“What’s your deal, Steph?” She yelled. “We’re friends! I just wanted to…”

“I don’t really think we’re friends, Chloe.” Steph cut her off and got back to her cables. Seeing a wizard playing with electricity was an unusual view and certainly quite amusing. Too bad no one was in the mood for jokes. The blue rebel would gladly serve them some.

“What the fuck?” Not friends? Where did it come from? “You know, we’re buddies, since like forever.”

The North brothers didn’t move an inch, but Steph came closer, wrapping herself in her long, black coat. Her staff, decorated with skulls and snakes, tapped the floor with the pace of her steps. Tap, tap, wooden knocking on stage, let the show begin. Two freshmen were finishing her job for her, so she could leave any moment, but it would be unfair to leave Chloe hanging. Discussing her personal issues in front of the whole school wasn’t her intention, although it didn’t really matter since no one was listening.

No one cared.
“Yeah? Really?” She shrugged, walking closer, with her bodyguards just a step away. “You’re on Max’s side with this. You’ve always been on her side.”

“I’m on nobody’s side!” Chloe’s eyes grew bigger along with her confusion. An attack was the last thing she had expected. “I just want to help you and talk and… shit.”

What had gotten into her today? Yeah, sure the breakup had to be damn upsetting, but Steph had never acted like that before. The last time they talked she seemed pretty relaxed and not troubled by the whole drama. Now, she switched gears, changing into a completely different person. Halloween charm or some shit. Damn it.

“What’s between you two, huh? Max was acting like you were her wife who went missing! You! Chloe this and Chloe that. She was going crazy over her friend more than she cared about her own girlfriend. I seriously don’t know how Rachel can put up with this shit, but I’m done.”

The blue pirate was getting more lost with every word spoken. She looked at the brothers, at Steph, then at the freshmen, wondering if her friend smoked something or took some not-so-happy pill today. Was it some kind of play? A drama club thingy? Alright, it was weird what Max had done, no questions about it, but suggesting that some weird thing was going on between them was plainly stupid. Gandalf the gay was losing her freaking mind.

“Dude!” She yelled again, fighting against the loud music. “There is nothing between me and Max!”

The staff hit the stage again, this time way noisier. The blue pirate grasped on her plastic sword handle not sure if that was an invitation to some silly fight. It wasn’t her war though, it was Max’s battle.

“Yeah, sure, I heard it like a hundred times. Actions speak louder than words, Chloe.” Steph put her hood on ready to walk away and her guards were more than eager to defend her in case some pirate forces were about to attack.

Jesus Christ, Chloe really just wanted to talk, ask how she was doing, and instead, she got dragged into a rabbit hole discovering a whole new world. A rebel in a wonderland, fucking great. Where was the rabbit then?

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Trying to stop Steph wasn’t the smartest idea, but the blue pirate was too baffled and annoyed by the accusations. “I just got fucking married! Max is my friend! My friend, nothing more!” Drew gave her a long look, warning not to get closer. What the hell. “Do you really want to argue about this now?”

Steph sighed, watching her for a while. Maybe Chloe really thought so, but Max had an entirely different perspective. Her little freckle was way too dedicated to her childhood friend, driven by some unstoppable force to defend and protect her at any cost. Even if those feelings weren’t reciprocated, there was something there. Some dishonesty, some hopes, some desire, some confessions to make. Gandalf the gay didn’t want to be part of either, now or never, wishing Rachel more luck in that matter.

“You know what I want?” Her moves were getting clumsy. Way too many drinks. “I want to fucking get wasted, get to my room, sit on my bed and open this fucking letter.” A wrinkled envelope got dragged out of her pocket. “You know why? Because of Max and your shit and everything else, I forgot about my own fucking skeletons and I need to dust them off. I have to know what they want to say.”
Saying that this speech had left Chloe baffled would be an understatement. The blue pirate was completely bewildered, not sure what to do or how to react.

“Skeletons?” Her pirate hat almost got thrown off by the rapid shake of her head. “What the fuck are you talking about, Steph?”

Gandalf the gay just shrugged and disappeared into the shadows of her hood, leaning on her staff. There was nothing more to share, not tonight, maybe never. Every single breakup was always heavy with consequences, re-evaluating friendships and social circles included. It was sad to let her go, remove Chloe Price from her life, but it seemed necessary. The blue pirate was bonded with her little freckle too much to stay objective. Not to mention the amount of drama it would bring.

Tons, tons of drama.

“Nevermind.” She just murmured, leaving Chloe behind and walking away with the North brothers. The staff was knocking slowly on the wooden surface. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

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“Did you try to talk to Steph?” Max asked when they sat at the edge of the pool, took off their shoes, rolled up the pants’ legs and soaked their feet in the water. The tiles were wet from the waves splashing constantly, unruly jagging in their white cage, making their clothes more or less wet. Oregon fall was unforgiving for the brave ones walking outside in their pants soaking wet, but they didn’t want to think about the consequences. It was a nice reminder of their childhood, even if the memory got disrupted by Chloe smoking one after another.

“No. I just passed her, that’s it.” The blue pirate enjoyed the cold waves, discovering how much she was fed up with the constant anger. She dropped her punk rebel persona some time ago and how finding herself in the same place again felt wicked. It wasn’t nostalgic by any means, but just plainly heavy. Thinking about how Steph had reacted, ready to fight her or warning her to do so, was still making her uncomfortable and hella upset. She really didn’t want to dwell on it and not with Max for certain.

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“Rachel says the same thing.”

They sat speechless for a long moment, enjoying their silence while watching the water, arm by arm, finally finding their way back to each other. A calm moment after a storm, the privileges of surviving the tempest. All the harsh arguments were yelled, with doors slammed, and now it was time to get back to basics, letting themselves to be fragile.

“Have you ever lied to her?” Max broke the quietness.

“To Rachel?” Chloe stretched her arms slowly watching the emerald lines on the ceiling. “Yeah, I did. That’s partly why she’s avoiding me. She learned about it today not in very pleasant circumstances.” They didn’t talk much after meeting Frank and Sera, rushing back home and then driving to Blackwell. Rachel said maybe ten words in total and disappeared from her sight as soon as they hit the school parking lot. She didn’t throw a fit, start a tantrum or even hiss at her pirate, slowly
recovering from today’s events and unusually not covering her wounds with pure anger. However, Chloe would prefer a solid, loud argument instead. A slap in the face would be better than this stiff reluctance.

“So, you’re square.” The swimming pool wasn’t heated, Max was getting cold noticing how much her ass got wet already. She zipped up her hoodie and hid her palms in its sleeves. “She didn’t tell you about Frank either.”

Her friend shrugged and moved a little, trying to protect the borrowed frock coat. Too late. The drama club would give her so much shit for ruining the outfit.

“Being square doesn’t work that way, Max. She had her reasons. I had my reasons too though.” She really didn’t want to elaborate on it, but it didn’t feel right to ignore her friend’s questions. Max had been ignored way too much. Ah, damn it. “I just wanted to protect her, you know? I wanted to protect her so fucking badly and I hurt her instead.”

The beams of the flashlights started to dance on the white walls letting them know they weren’t alone here. Blackwell security obviously decided to check out the premises, patrolling the empty rooms, usually not that vacant during school celebrations. Chloe was wondering if David was working today, trying to recall his actual schedule. Facing her stepfather wouldn’t be that bad though and at least she wouldn’t end up visiting Wells’ office. The last discourse with the principal wasn’t pleasant, to put it mildly, even if seeing his reaction to Rachel’s last name change was worth all the pirate treasures.


“I didn’t tell her about Sera.” Thankfully they had discussed those events a few months ago and Chloe didn’t have to repeat the whole story, cutting strictly to the case. The details of her first encounter with Rachel’s mother were getting blurry with every passing day and it was quite difficult to recollect what was said and promised. Three years, the whole eternity. “I mean I kinda told her that I met Sera and we chatted a bit, but never explained how it went, you know?” She gestured weakly with her smoke burning between her fingers. “Sera told me if I loved Rachel I would lie to her and wouldn’t tell her about her father being an asshole. And I was like, fuck it. I’m a terrible liar anyway, right? James was a dickhead trying to OD her so yeah, Rach should know, right? Not a big deal.” Protecting herself with a wall of excuses was subconscious, regardless of Max’s presence. Her reasons were legit goddamnit, but Chloe still felt like shit. Legit shit. “Well, today I discovered it was a hella big of a deal for her. Rachel was always avoiding the topic anyway, but I had no idea she was looking for answers anyway. Since I was a useless piece of crap, she kept asking Frank…” Stupid smoke got wet. She needed another one.

Too much waving.

“Oh god, Chloe.” She felt Max’s hand on her shoulder, but it only made her huddle more. Pity was never helping. Pity should go fuck its selfie.

“And he didn’t tell her shit either. But he did…” Every cig tasted like a swimmer’s slips and ash in this space. Was that the reason why smoking was forbidden? The fire hazard wouldn’t be a problem with all this water around. Rules, stupid rules. “He did something terrible to her.” Her hands started to shake. “I could’ve stopped it, I could’ve done something. I can’t stop thinking that if I told her, nothing would’ve happened or if I’d kept my mouth shut… I…” To inhale or not to inhale. “I don’t know.”

Her friend was stroking her arm slowly, in a calming manner. A lullaby for her blue pirate, a sailor’s song at sunset. The freckles glittered in the light when she smiled softly not disturbed of them
potentially being caught. They would talk their way out if needed and Max didn’t want to rush now, hiding from the guards.

The flashlights got closer.

“It would’ve happened regardless,” Max stated with caution. “Rachel would always look for more answers, behind your back or not. That’s who she is.”

Chloe smirked sadly, shutting herself up with a drag of smoke. She wanted to tell her more, but it was so confusing where the line of honesty was and how not to cross it. How much should she share with her friend, which parts should be kept just between her and Rachel? What was the custom, what was the right thing, where would the trustworthiness become a betrayal? What was the placement of a thin, red line called a pure, fucking lie?

“Maybe.” Everything was so blurry. The lines, the water’s waves, her own damn vision. “But I could’ve found the answers for her. I could’ve protected her somehow. I could’ve done so much more. If I had known that she wanted to learn more about Sera I would’ve done everything, seriously everything to help her. Even if it meant getting high with Frank or getting drunk with Nathan Prescott or… some shit. Rachel… My Rach…” Great, her friend was suffering after a breakup and now Chloe was sobbing like freaking baby, asking for a helpful hand herself. “She had to do it alone and it went so wrong. I didn’t know what to do, Max, so I just married her. Stupid, right?”

“Not as stupid.”

“If I could rewind time…”

Max almost laughed.

“It wouldn’t help with shit. Trust me.” She rested her head on the blue shoulder. “You care too much, you would rewind it over and over trying to make it perfect and go crazy not being able to.”

“And look who is talking now.” Chloe peered at her under the pirate hat, ditching the smoke straight into the pool and holding her friend closer, grateful for her presence. It was getting colder too. They both needed some decent hug, a real embrace. A human close to another human being.

“It’s not your fault,” Max whispered, finally feeling their special connection coming back. It wasn’t about unclarified feelings, relationships or whatnot, but simply being with somebody who got her. Really got her, even if she couldn’t understand herself. “You are who you are, Chloe.”

She shut up, feeling stupid, sharing some obvious truths instead of deep insights. There was no wisdom that came to her mind though, except a blank check of a promise that everything would be fine. For both of them.

Somehow.

“So are you, Max. But fear not, we will sail safely through these wild, stormy waters.” This hat was getting ridiculous and was bothering them both, but Chloe didn’t want to break the cuddle just to get rid of it. “Together.”

“Together forever.”

It got warmer promptly.

When they were kids the world of imagination was a perfect escape, a relief from growing up, the boring and grim reality. They were using their plastic swords and cheap pirate hats to create their
inner kingdom, where no parents were arguing, no one was worrying about the mortgage, no one talked nervously about a possible divorce. They were courageous and brave, ready to face any dangerous adventure because the ending of those was already planned and created. No surprises, no worries, all the hopes. Good times.

“Damn right, Long Max Silver.” Chloe sniffed trying to get back to those times, to the atmosphere of an illusory pirate galleon they had been sailing. “Our ship might be shit ‘n th’ weather gettin’ worse, but we ‘ave some booty chests t’ protect. Find th’ safe land, find th’ starb’rd route. If we had to fight, we will. We shall nah give up, shall nah make any more mistakes. We ‘ave t’ stick together in this mess, me hearty. No one can conquer those waters alone. No one, Max.” The hug got firmer as she rubbed her eyes, hiding a few tears.

Her first mate noticed and held her hand, showing she understood, she knew. There was no reason to pretend, she could drop her act. Chloe sniffled remembering that even if they didn’t have much in common, even if they argued about dumb shit from time to time, Max was always the one who was seeing through her game, not judging. Never judging. How this little freckle was able to withstand her annoying wits was beyond her, but thank God for her. Thank God for Max Caulfield.

“The brave captain trying to protect his merry crew?” Max asked, hoping to cheer her up a little.

Chloe’s fingers squeezed the hilt of her toy sword. It was the only element of her outfit that wasn’t borrowed but linked her to her happy times instead. Her hand was still burning a little with scratches and blood marks. Fake weapon and real scars. What a combination.

“At all costs.” Cheering up was a trade, should work both ways, just like honesty. “Especially when my courageous crew and first mate especially are attacked by a jolly bunch o’ nasty, furious skeletons.”

“Happens hella often recently.” Max nodded, killing the mood a little and looked around, wondering if they would be caught by Blackwell’s special forces.

The security’s flashlights entered the swimming pool space, circled around, striking them for a moment, but whoever was working today, decided to leave them alone. Maybe it was the Halloween spirit, or the guard didn’t want to be bothered with writing a report. Funny, every time they stopped caring about the danger, it just disappeared. The more they worried, the worse it was getting.

“I know, right? Seems like everybody has a skeleton in their closet.” Chloe looked at her finger, the tattooed name, a symbol of her great gay wedding and the new, adult life. Max touched it for a moment, stroking its shape and then laced fingers with her with pure, kind support.

“But not everybody can be a brave pirate.” She poked her arm, smiling. Finally smiling widely after days of misery and bittersweet smirks. “Not like you. Or me. Like us. No one can beat us, Chloe. No one ever will.”

***

His phone vibrated discretely, letting him know it was time to end this. Jefferson looked at the classroom clock, surprised that they had already spent a few hours together. He could swear their moments could be counted in minutes. Rachel was a good listener and an interesting interlocutor, at least trying to keep up with his stream of consciousness, now verbalized and served as a guide. They
both could go on sharing their life stories until dawn, but his night was pre-planned.

There was an art to be done. A transformation was awaiting him.

“You shared two cases that are touching your past, Rachel, but it’s the present or future that bothers you the most.” He decided to speed up their conversation, hoping the pace wouldn’t be too hasty. “I understand if you prefer not to talk about it though. The fresh wounds are the most painful ones.”

She wrapped her arms around her shoulders, sinking in the white wings. The more Rachel opened up, the more the need to cover herself in the carnal sense grew. The teacher hadn’t sent her a single inappropriate look or even mentioned her provoking outfit, obviously not interested. It was about how much he was seeing from her character; how easy it was to read her.

Playing hard to get was part of her game, one way or another. In this case, mostly emotionally.

“It’s not really a wound, more like a concern. My girlfriend…” Her eyebrows rose when she corrected herself. “My wife lied to me about something.” Was that really a lie? Did a hidden truth equal dishonesty? The definitions got fuzzier in her mind when she tried to follow Chloe’s way of thinking. Whatever was it called, it hurt, like a stupid reckless stab done with a plastic sword. Seemingly not significant, but still painful.

“And it bothers you because it makes her no different than people from your past?”

It was an interesting assumption. Rachel had never thought about it this way.

“She is different and special, and I don’t question my future with her.” She answered fast, trying to prevent any kind of questions about their relationship. She had to face way too many. “I was just shocked that Chloe was hiding such a thing from me for years, especially after forcing me to come clean about many things I’ve done or said. She tried to explain, but I didn’t want to listen. I still don’t know if I want to.” They would go in circles in this argument, trying to clarify the unexplainable, getting angry and more upset at each other, bringing back all the horrors that should already be forgotten. The understanding was already there, no need for another rough ride.

“Seems it was a hell of a day for you. It was hard to look at the case from her perspective. Or you knew her perspective already.” Jefferson was reading her like an open book as it was getting easier every time. Awarded with a surprised gaze, he tilted his head slightly. “You probably know why she did it.”

“She didn’t want to hurt me.” Protecting Chloe was her second nature. Explaining her was part of the deal from the get-go. “Although when I did the same thing for the same reason, she went crazy…”

“So, she didn’t make a choice to forgive you?” He nodded slowly, not in need to hear the details of the story. They weren’t relevant anyway.

Rachel blinked.

Friend. She forgot how much she strived for a real friend, how profound this necessity was. There were a lot of people who liked her, and she was going along pretty well, but Chloe was the only person with whom Rachel shared a serious bond and an intense connection. Frank betrayed her so many times, her relations with her parents were still questionable, Steph was great but too close to Max, Juliet was lacking the ability to listen. Max… was just Max and Chloe’s best buddy. All the males at the school wanted to talk to her only to get into her pants, with Nathan Prescott in the lead. Arcadia Bay was too small, or she was too picky, but Rachel hadn’t a truthful friend for years.
Maybe never, since people she had spent time with in Long Beach were just kids having fun, not soulmates. She trusted Chloe with her life but sometimes it would be so good to talk about her girl, her baby, her wife, somehow objectively. Not to advertise her flaws and complain but just to gain a different perspective. Make sure.

_Aren’t we all at fault in this?_

Could Mark Jefferson become her friend? No condescending attitude, no forced advice, no seductive, creepy behavior. It almost seemed too good to be true, or she became way too wary.

“I think she is unable to make this choice.” She whispered, thinking of all the brawls with Chloe, asking for her forgiveness and another chance in trusting her. Maybe it wasn’t the choosing but the fault in her wife’s nature.

The more Jefferson was learning about the blue punk, the more Rachel got him hooked on her story. He prolonged the moment of leaving, enjoying her reactions. It helped him too to rust off drill bits, sharpening the blades of his mind’s saws. He didn’t have that many similar opportunities in Blackwell, mostly dealing with idiots.

So many idiots.

“It means that she’s lacking understanding behind the deepest motives of your action.” She looked at him in astonishment again. It felt good to turn the tables of the way her mind was working. Felt satisfying. “Do you want to pay her back with the same obliviousness?”

It almost felt like a guilt trip and threw Rachel off.

“Sounds childish.” She murmured, tracking the outline of a pack of Marlboro. A smoke would be very much apricated but not allowed in the classroom especially in front of her teacher. The cigarettes were tempting though, she was not used to talking about her life without one lit up.

“Sounds human.” His gesture encouraged her to follow her need and take one, while he didn’t even blink at the fact that one of his students was smoking. Jefferson knew that people usually relaxed way easier with a cigarette dangling out of their lips. He was the teacher here, setting up the rules and breaking them if needed. “Revenge is the most natural force that drives us. That’s the one big difference between man and animals. Every creature is able to feel compassion, but only humans can push their rage to the point of striving for a brutal vengeance.”

She lit up. “Doesn’t it make us monsters?”

The flame launched from her zippo got him blurry for a moment while he disappeared in the fire and smoke. The sudden flash got her blinded a bit since her eyesight had gotten used to the shadows. Mark Jefferson became just a part of the darkness and then he appeared again. Magic.

“Fascinating monsters, maybe.” He still didn’t react at her smoking, taking it as a natural habit, nothing special. It was way more than she expected from a guy holding a reputation of this cool, adored teacher. “Bold pirates, fearless and determined. Do not fear your own nature, Rachel. Embrace it. Enjoy it.”

“Pirates?” She exhaled a long cloud of smoke. “You mentioned pirates. Interesting comparison. Chloe dressed up as a pirate tonight.”

“I know. One blue-haired captain was looking for you earlier. I’m quite observant. That’s the art teacher thing.” He winked and stood up swiftly, feeling his phone vibrating again. Nathan was waiting, the object was prepared. “Speaking of, I have to excuse myself and get back to my duties.
My intuition says that you’ll be needed soon as well.” She trembled hearing his footsteps, not believing they just finished their conversation. The magnitude of this encounter hadn’t really hit her yet, but it was more important than just a chit-chat in an empty classroom.

“Yeah, thank you, Mr. Jefferson.” She kept smoking boldly, wondering if he would ask her to kill the cig before leaving.

Nothing like that happened.

“Pleasure is all mine.” The teacher bowed his head. “If you would like to talk any other day, please don’t hesitate to reach me. I’m always around.”

The door squeaked when he opened it wildly and almost bumped into Chloe, who scrutinized the teacher from top to bottom but then noticed Rachel. Ignoring him entirely, she walked fast towards her angel, taking off her pirate hat, then putting it back not sure what to do with her hands. It was a common occurrence for Chloe Price every time she was nervous or guilty of some mischief. She was looking for Rachel for half of the evening and now wasn’t sure what to say exactly. Her girl understood though and reached for her, showing the blue rebel she was missed. To be frank, Rachel was damn happy to see those blue eyes sparkling so brightly.

Chloe. Her Chloe.

“Rachel. Rach.” The pirate walked closer, grabbing her hand and kissing her fingers. She would prefer to go for a serious, longing kiss, but Rachel might be still mad or annoyed. Happy that she found her, she didn’t even question the smoke in her angel’s hand taking it as the most natural view on earth despite the environment.

“Hi, baby.” Rachel tapped off the ash and then decided to finish feeding her cancer altogether. Jefferson might be forgiving and super cool, but he was truly an exception. A detention wasn’t something she was striving for.

“I’ve been looking for you. I got worried.” The blue pirate bent towards her staring into her eyes. “Can we talk?”

Rachel smiled and stroked her cheek lightly. Despite the whole distress, the loneliness and shadows in the classroom, she missed Chloe so much. Although sometimes it was good to talk to somebody else just to experience the longing. She pulled her pirate closer noticing her clothes reeked of chlorine and were quite wet. So, Chloe spent some time at the swimming pool, playing a sailor in the artificial sea. Power of Halloween. Hopefully, she had fun.

“Chloe Price, the bold and fearless pirate, wants to talk?” She hummed softly.

“I always want to talk.” The blue rebel hated to live in distress, waiting for some serious shit to come. She preferred to lay all the cards on the table here and now, just to avoid a postponement. “I know the thing that Bowers said made you upset and… Please, let me explain.”

“Chloe…” Rachel’s finger was stroking her embroidered collar. “It’s… You’ll tell me everything tomorrow, alright?”

Her wife frowned, used to direct and rapid clashes. “Why not now?”

Mark Jefferson didn’t offer Rachel advice, but he got her thinking. She was indeed too smart for her own good and now she wanted to put everything she learned to use. What would be a better practice than to make Chloe smile?
“I want you to take your time. To understand and embrace it. I’m a mess today, baby. A lot of things happened, and I don’t want to go through another tense talk. I don’t want to yell at you or get angry out of nowhere. We don’t have to rush with this.” A slow, tender kiss was served. First loving one today. They both deserved it. “I just don’t want to take it out on you.”

It was as surprising as sunrise at midnight, and Chloe expected some conniving blow or additional enlightenment. Not getting any, she just carefully accepted the fact that the fates favored some social delinquents today and it should be appreciated.

“No you want to come back home now?” She asked just in case, ready to take off the soaked costume and change into something more fitting. Like nothing.

“Hell no.” Rachel poked her chest lightly, laughing and throwing her head back. “I want to get out from the shadows. Have fun with my fearless, sexy, hot pirate.” Oh, another kiss, it was getting better. “Show off my wife, so to speak. Show everybody that you are mine and mine only.” The hazel eyes narrowed slightly touched with possessiveness and greediness. “If you don’t mind, of course.”

“You bet I don’t,” Chloe smirked, baffled a little, but glad to be by her side again. She offered her girl her arm with a charming smile and it got accepted. Rachel jumped off from the class table, leading them to the exit. “What got into you?”

Mr. Keaton would personally hang Chloe for ruining this frock coat. The blue pirate got pulled closer in a protective manner. They could argue, they could lie to each other, but at the end of the day, Rachel would always protect her girl, wet clothes or not. It was who she was after all.

“I talked to some friend.” She kissed Chloe’s ear and giggled at her shy reaction. “Shared some stuff. Broadened my perspective.”

“Maybe you should talk to this friend more often then?” Her wife said when they left the classroom, closing the darkness inside and entering the hallway. Everybody was waiting for them, having fun in the front yard, so they rushed a bit to catch up with the party.

“Maybe.” Rachel smiled looking at Jefferson disappearing at the end of the corridor. “Maybe I will. Now, let’s have some fun, baby.”
Drive for Distraction

The coffee was black and bitter, tasted like ash mixed with shit and nervous anticipation. Despite the taste, Chloe Price finished the cup with one long gulp and hunched over her books reading paragraph after paragraph again. She knew the content of those pages by heart, but her anxiety was lashing her back with a long ass whip, convinced that a few more hours of preparation would be more than necessary. You gotta work, bitch, so she tried again, shifting her shoulders softly and pretending she didn't notice Rachel's questioning look.

Exams. Important exams. And papers.

The blue rebel, not feeling precisely rebellious this afternoon, turned the page and tried to focus, but her finger kept playing with a corner of a blue brochure hidden in the back of her textbook. She was pretty aware of its content as well and really wanted to discuss it with this one blonde monster sitting in front of her, but the courage needed for that kind of conversation was appearing and disappearing just like an ocean's tide. Damn, this radio playing quietly in the background wasn't helping. She sighed deeply, filling her mug again and taking another sip of the terrible coffee. It wasn't that bad after all when she got used to the taste.

Damn, they really should talk about it, but the past few days were jam-packed with tension and marked with a tune of supposed ignorance of all the essential subjects. Being reckless was part of her nature, but forced obliviousness made Chloe Price feel stupid. Fist Frank, then Sera, then Max, then those silly people at school, then Steph and Max again. More than enough to sidetrack her mind, but her second favorite organ didn't work like that. Even diving into books wasn't really working. Rachel was pretending as well, a freaking Oscar actress, waving all the issues away and cheerfully babbling about her drama club rehearsals or getting into some certain social delinquent's pants. Studying and sex, the final solution, high school in its prime.

The brochure was summoning Chloe inescapably with its glossy paper, so she secretly snatched it out, looking at it again. The described requirements were pretty easy, she even started to write her essays, and it was going quite well since she poured her heart and soul into those. It would be nice to ask her girl for help though, request some insights or suggestions, but first Chloe would have to introduce this idea and she sucked at initiating any plans to begin with. They all ended terribly. Like, all of them.

Shit. She wouldn't get in anyway though, she shouldn't even make a big deal out of it.

Chloe peeked at Rachel who was just sitting there, a relaxed and reckless angel, reading some boring shit about the constitution and clicking with her pen in a way that would drive everybody crazy. The blue trouble didn't mind though, enjoying the view but the more she was watching her wife, the more nervous she became. Work, bitch, her anxiety reminded her of the duties again, so she sniffed and got back to the diagrams, tables, and formulas.

Lash. Focus. Lash. Ah, damn it.

She almost succeeded, losing herself in another scientific theory, when her phone buzzed loudly, forcing them both to look up from their readings. Chloe eyed the flashing screen and groaned, seeing who decided to make her day even more amusing.
"Shit…" she murmured, tossing the phone away. How did Sera even get her number? Ah, Frank, it had to be Frank obviously. One more reason why this drug dealing scumbag should stop existing and evaporate along with his RV, dog, and secret stashes. He was whining so much that all his contacts got lost with the previous planner, but he just had to remember her number. Just freaking great.

"What's wrong?"

Chloe lifted up her head, surprised. She didn't hear Rachel getting up and approaching, too confused about what to do with yet another offer of a meeting with someone who could be called her mother-in-law. Like she didn't have enough problems. On top of everything, the radio started playing an advertisement, the most infuriating thing in the world.

"Just... studying," she responded quickly hiding the brochure below her book.

"Uh-huh. I know this face." Rachel didn't give a single look at school notes, not interested in the science altogether, tossing her own notepad away along with the constitution. She tilted her head, pushing the chair and blocking the blue apt student's access to the desk. Oh, so no studying. "C'mon, Chloe. I know that something is on your mind and it's not chemistry or advanced math." The sad and long sighs from this part of the room had been getting more frequent and were playing on Rachel's nerves anyway. Ignoring severe issues was one thing, trying not to murder her own wife was another.

This frustration needed an intervention.

"Oh, you know… stuff…" said Chloe, and it made the situation worse. Or better, since Rachel just rolled her eyes and sat on her lap not willing to leave this territory unless some answers would be delivered, willingly or with a dose of some tempting persuasion. Being enduring and direct wouldn't work, but the blonde angel had some other, more tender cards up her sleeve.

"Stuff?" She smirked, playing with the blue locks on Chloe's neck. "What kind of stuff?" And the battle was won before it even started.

"I just think you really should call her." Frankly, the blue pirate wouldn't mind getting back to this topic. Moreover, Rachel asked. It would be rude to lie, wouldn't it? "Or just let her know you are not interested."

Click, click, said the pen. Oh, so it was about Sera. Rachel narrowed her eyes, aware of the fact that they both were prolonging the inevitable. Her mother, who marvelously came back from the dead, recently started to demand two things, becoming more tenacious every passing day. First, she wanted to meet Chloe and chit-chat with her about some historical events and unfinished business. That was quite logical, especially after a specific heart-to-heart confession and some requests made three years ago. Second, she kept asking for the blue permission to contact Rachel, apparently feigning that she cared about their marriage vows. Great. Her poor wife had been harassed for over a week now, tempted and warned by carefully crafted messages that confused the hell out of the blue pirate. Sera, who never even tried to text her daughter directly, knew very well that Chloe would be way easier to manipulate or to perplex than the blood of her blood. Clever, although Rachel didn't give a flying fuck what her so-called mother wanted. Not now anyway.

Chloe looked tense though. Way too tense.

"I'm interested in something else." A soft, long kiss was served, then it deepened and got impatiently
rough, mainly when Rachel's lips moved to the blue neck and shoulders, pulling her girl closer. Chloe wanted to object, but she found her hand under her girl's white shirt moving up in a flirtatious manner.


"Rach, I'm serious." She murmured responding to the kisses, not fully aware of how quickly she got seduced. It wasn't her fault though, she didn't start it, like at all.

"Me too."

Oh.

Rachel's hips moved forward with a firm suggestion as Chloe's hand willingly pressed her stronger. Despite her reservations, she just closed her eyes feeling her breath speeding and her own body betraying her yet again. The consequences of living in one room, damn it. Her girl was usually playing hard to get, except the moments when she wanted to forget about something really annoying, and the whole thing with Sera really got into her head, made itself comfortable and scratched the walls of her thoughts every other minute. Rachel tried to calm it down, forcing some silence and, for crying out loud, literally, only one thing was working.

Except for the books and exams. Sometimes.

Chloe was one of those people who would learn everything that was necessary to pass the test in the first run but then read everything over and over, to the point of confusing herself and panicking that she wouldn't remember shit. It was better for them both to forget about chemistry, math or whatever the blue pirate was studying, just for the sake of good grades and lack of hysteria the next morning. Thankfully, Rachel was here to distract, and she didn't have to ask twice. It was a good thing then. A necessary one.

A zipper was opened. Somebody moaned. Somebody hissed. Somebody's back got hit by the desk's edge.

"Don't tease me."

"Or?"

"Just…" Rachel's frantic breath was burning her neck. "Don't tease me."

A razor-sharp shiver was shared. A small whimper escaped Chloe's lips. The chair moaned and creaked lightly. The murmur of the radio's music faded mute as the sound switched its current melting everything into one desperate mutter. A possessive kiss, one tough scratch on somebody's back and then Rachel biting her lip almost cutting the skin. She was held strongly though, to the last, long shudder.

Exams. What a foreign term.

"That was…" The blonde hair was still down, covering her face like a messy curtain.

"Badass?" Chloe winked, still breathing heavily, discovering how hungry she really was and wouldn't mind repeating the rodeo. Not their first one today though and for sure not the last. This girl would be the death of her, although that kind of fatality would be goddamn epic. R.I.P. Chloe Price, who passed away with a wide grin on her face and her hand locked inside tight black jeans. She took the blonde locks out of Rachel's face to uncover the smile. Damn shy smile though.
"I was gonna say hot." Stressing over the exams was out of the picture. Good. "But yeah, badass too." She lifted Chloe's chin with one finger ready to kiss out some of this smirk. "And speaking of an ass..."

The blue purr was the best award ever, and Rachel was just about to continue with the R-rated theme of the evening when the door to the room opened, and Joyce walked in, apparently annoyed that no one answered her knocking for a good two minutes straight. Their privacy wasn't disturbed very often but, for crying out loud, how long was she supposed to wait in the kitchen asking for help?

"Mom, we're studying!" Chloe rose her hands with her eyes wide open, still flustered and obviously guilty of recently participating in a very unusual kind of lecture. Rachel, miraculously avoiding a heart attack, produced the most innocent smile on earth, not even trying to get up from the blue lap, but pulling her shirt down to hide her pants broad open. Joyce was way too observant to fall for this trick though.

"Yes. I can see that." She crossed her arms, not deceived even for a second about why the couple hadn't answered a call out from downstairs. A thunderous and repetitive call out. "Dinner will be ready in 10. Please don't study that much."

She turned around and left the room almost immediately still not sure how she should react. They were, in fact, newlyweds, and no one should be surprised seeing them more or less intimate. However, the number of times they were getting caught was escalating lately. One marriage certificate and Chloe decided that it was okay to embarrass her own mother on a daily basis not even trying to hide as much as she had used to. On the other hand, it was expected and should also be encouraged, especially after the knot was tied. This whole marriage thing was damn confusing.

Joyce shook her head and walked downstairs.

Kids.

Rachel giggled a little and kissed her softly, as soon as they were alone. Her girl being embarrassed so severely was always so adorable and cute. Fuck the dinner. Those lips looked tastier.

"So, I guess we're not gonna talk about it." Chloe broke off the kissing session and sighed, mentally preparing for the walk of shame. Her mother would either keep suspiciously silent during the family meals or crack a few very inappropriate jokes, making her daughter choke on every bite. Sometimes it seemed that Joyce really wanted the blue pirate to die in the middle of the dinner since her need of making her blush rapidly escalated to a dangerous level of teasing them both with quite an adult sense of humor. Rachel seemed entirely immune though, responding with some brilliant and witty retorts, apparently thinking it was a form of acceptance of their relationship and marriage. Even if it was, Chloe would be incredibly grateful if it didn't happen while she was eating. Or drinking. Or just being around. Living in this house lately indeed became life-threatening or at least quite hazardous.

It wasn't her fault though. It was on Rachel. It was always Rachel. Except not.

"Why does the thing with Sera bother you so much?" Her blonde angel frowned, zipping up her pants. "It's my mother, it's my problem."

She got stopped from getting up with one swift and firm move. Rachel scoffed but stayed in place, still a little bit shaken after. The radio boomed with a slow and quite fitting song, one of their favorites, so it would be hella uncouth to leave those arms so quickly. The idea of Chloe being in between a rock and a hard place was upsetting and annoying though. Rachel hated the fact that her girl was being used and couldn't force herself to deny any kind of contact with Sera.
"It's our problem." The blue persistence corrected her, pointing at her mobile again and secretly massaging her hand, cut by the pants' zipper. "She texted me. Again."

"I know." Rachel sighed.

"Oh yeah? Are you checking my phone now?"

The seriousness of Chloe's voice was kinda offensive. Rachel would never invade her girl's privacy, not since they had gotten back together. Previously, she might lurk on it once or twice or was tempted to, but there was no reason to break the trust anyway. Checking the device to see the messages from Sera was even more absurd.

"No, you dumbass." She kissed her forehead. "I know because of the way you act. I don't believe that all the exams are occupying your mind so much, not to mention that you are Miss. Grant’s favorite by now. Sera wants to meet you, fine. You want to meet her, that's really great. I know I should probably play a role in this magic gathering, but I just don't feel like it. Every time Sera enters my life, there is a freaking drama." Or some people stabbing her in the middle of nowhere but reminding Chloe of this event was always heavy with apologizing and useless explanations. "I want to enjoy the fact that there is actually no drama whatsoever. It's a hella nice feeling. Just enjoying me being me and us." The bullet shells jingled lightly when she played with the top of Chloe's shirt, pulling the necklace by accident. "And you." The blue eyes sparkled with an impulsive challenge. "Oh, you."

The radio switched back to the boring advertisement, but they didn't notice, deaf and mute to the outside again. The bullets rattled a few more times and then clung sharply when tugged at once. Somebody's shirt got clutched firmly in a desperate grasp, almost ripping of the fabric.

"Dinner is in 10." Chloe broke another very long practice of kissing. Judging by the intensity, it was an AP class. Or a PhD. The bewilderment was taking over, she was taken over, and hell, she was really good at this course.

Rachel already stopped thinking, biting her neck and dealing with her belt buckle, entirely absorbed by the occurring practice. It started as a great tease, but she couldn't help herself, especially with Chloe responding so quickly. The blue devil didn't even protest, throwing back her head and surrendering. Her fault.

"So, you have to study fast," she whispered only.

***

Hi Steph,

She smoothened the crumpled paper, caressing its uneven edges, where the surface was slowly turning to mossy dust. The note was read so many times and during so many circumstances that the letters were slowly fading away, marked by tears, water, the filth of her pockets, beer, coffee and ash of a joint smoked not so long time ago. She had tried literally everything to compose herself, get a grip and decompress, but wasn't very successful.

One more time, she promised herself. One more time and that would be it. Final.
One big, fat, fucking lie.

Hi Steph,

Fuck, she was still tensed, still stiff, rigid just like a plastic dummy. It's just a letter, a message in a bottle from her past, nothing more. Her name written in a similar manner brought back all the memories though. She almost choked seeing it in writing for the first time. Now it was just a sharp inhale, what damn progress.

Except not.

It's as hard for me to write this letter as for you to read it, I guess. This is my fifth try if you can believe it. I tried to reach you by phone and all modern social media so either I was doing it wrong, or you really don't want to talk to me. If the latter, I can't blame you, I probably wouldn't either. So, this is my last and final try. You can just trash this letter and forget about me, and I won't contact you again. If you decide to read and respond, then maybe I will have a chance to tell you my story and explain myself. If not, it doesn't matter anyway.

It mattered. Steph had no idea how much it mattered until she opened this letter a few days ago. She was still hurting, after all those years, still walking, sleeping and eating with an open wound in her chest and even if kinda involved with somebody else, even if thinking about Max every day, it was still painful. When Kris was trying to contact her in a more modern way, Steph felt entitled to reject her, so proud of her own anger and pleased with the fact that she was indeed right. Three years ago, she predicted that this girl would come back seeking some reconciliation, forgiveness even. It felt good to be right, but it opened yet another can of worms with a huge, obnoxious label called 'longing'.

Damn you, Kris.

You can just trash this letter and forget about me, and I won't contact you again.

Joke's on you, Key. Trash it? Never.

Her fingers grasped the letter again, she had to force her hands to release the poor, paper prisoner. Last time or not, she didn't want to damage or ruin it. The handwriting was so beautiful, so familiar, even if smudged by the reader's leftovers.

I miss you. I think about you and us every day.

Like in a known routine, Steph had to take a deep breath reading those two sentences again. Me too, she wanted to cry. Me too.

Fuck it.

About all the chances that we had and everything we've lost in between. I know you have your own life there and probably some beautiful and hot girlfriend while I'm still stuck in Brazil. My exile comes to an end soon though, and my family has generously let me to come back home. I know it's far-fetched, but would you like to meet? I promise I won't make it awkward or uncomfortable, but the thought of seeing you again was the only thing that kept me going during all these years.

Seeing her again wouldn't be awkward or uncomfortable, but a gift from the universe, a widely open door, a final invitation. Steph was extremely grateful that she hadn't opened this letter when Max was around though. Even imagining meeting Kris again smelled like cheating. Agreeing to it could end in a disaster.
She sniffed, scratching her nose then adjusting her beanie. It was hard to decide what to do with her hands, what to do with herself as a whole actually. When they had met for the first time, the sparks were flying so high that they almost burned down the assholes called stars. The years had passed though, they both had changed and gone through a lot, but Steph knew she was one step from walking to this river again and letting herself to be kidnapped by the waves of supposedly innocent circumstances. What they had had was powerful, overwhelming, even if illegal. Damn, she was sixteen, then seventeen, and Kris, five years her senior, was playing with fire since their first kiss. She had paid the price though, sent to the other side of the world, denied access to the luxuries of the modern world only because she dared to fall in love. Steph, left in the dark, tried to reach her somehow, calling her, wanting to know what had happened, even asking people around and putting them both in danger. Now she wasn't sure if she wanted to really forget about her first lover or the horror that had come after.

Max. She tried to think about Max, but her now ex-girlfriend was avoiding her even if she hadn't officially called the whole thing off yet. Their hiatus was getting more and more permanent. Maybe it was a sign from heaven, perhaps it was supposed to happen?

Her and Kris. Now she was daydreaming, stupid wishful thinking. What she had with Max was stable, passionate, and could last forever. They had started to erect the pillars for a family, something that would survive against all the odds. Kris was a free spirit, older, more experienced, and had never promised her eternity. She didn't promise much at all to be honest, except loving her till the end of the world and judging by this letter she had kept her world.

Fuck it.

_I don't expect you ever to forgive me or even consider me a friend in the future. I know how much pain I caused and how hard it was for you especially with all this family bullshit. It was never my intention to leave without a word and please believe me, I wanted to let you know but couldn't._

Oh, Steph could believe in it. Moreover, she knew why Kris had to leave and who to blame for it directly. Fucking Nathan, his own sister’s favorite, had decided to get some praise from his rich and powerful daddy, betraying her and telling him all the secrets. Dangerous, illegal, heartbreaking shocking secrets that ruined them both with a snap of the fingers. Small, sneaky scum, like most of his relatives, mentally unhinged asshole. Sean Prescott, after awarding his son with a nonchalant tap on the head, had to interfere and act quickly though. His only daughter being accused of sleeping with a minor would wreck his business and the family's famous last name. It was better just to remove Kris silently, sending her away and pretend that nothing had happened. Out of sight, out of mind. Simple. Not simple for Steph. Or for Nathan's beloved sister.

He hated her after that, blaming her for Kris’s disappearance, arrogantly not seeing his own fault in her banishment. Because of his actions, Steph almost had gotten expelled but found enough courage to stand her ground and warn the whole infamous family that they either had to stop bullying her or she would report abuse, including all the details they wanted to hide so badly. Nathan stepped back, so did his father, but Steph was sure that if she re-entered the picture they would strike back with full force again, despite Kris's wishes.

Kris. She thought she forgot her laugh, the tone of her voice, the way she winked at her during the long, night walks, but no, it was still there, imprinted and unremovable like a tattoo or a branded, burnt sign. Three years ago, they had it all, everything, and then there was nothing. The mysterious lady Prescott vanished as a golden dream and Steph had never heard from her again.

If Max was here, if Max was still caring or at least trying to patch the things up, maybe the need to see her again wouldn't be so burning. Although her little freckle was probably still daydreaming
about Chloe Price. It was subconscious or not, but Steph didn't want to be anybody's consolation prize. She knew her value, taught well by the person who sent her this letter.

The person who still cared after years of exile.

If you would like to meet, please text me or just shoot me an email. I will totally understand if you decide not to respond though. I just really hope you will.

Hope.

There was nothing to forgive, nothing to be angry about, and that scared Steph the most. No leverage, no self-protection, no reason to start yelling and telling her to go back to the hell she came back from. Kris gave her a choice, she wanted to be civil even if every letter on this paper screamed volumes about how much she had been missing her and was hoping for some kind of happy ending.

I won't complicate your life, I promise. I just want to see you once again, that's it.

K.

One letter. Period. She was still careful not to sign the letter with her full name. Just in case, probably paranoid after the whole drama. One note, so much meaning, so much denotation. Period. A supposed finish line in disguise.

No finish line this time.

I won't complicate your life, I promise.

"You already did, Kris" Steph murmured, reaching for her phone and typing the phone number written in the post scriptum. "You already did."

***

The restaurant wasn't crowded, but they decided to sit outside, both preferring the cold ocean breeze and the freedom to smoke than the stench of fried fish, the noise of crashing plates and the cooks cheerfully yelling at each other. Visited mostly by the tourists, it wasn't a popular place among the locals, who usually favored a homecooked meal or staying in Two Whales, the best-kept secret of Arcadia Bay. It wasn't even about the food, which was supposedly great, or the location, just by the broad, white beach with the fantastic view of the lighthouse. Some eateries were just labeled as the outsiders' spot, and no resident would walk in and sit there with their heads held high. It would feel like a betrayal, a step too far, a treason, and Chloe Price, taking her seat by the wooden table felt guilty of all those sins before they even started talking.

"So, you married my daughter," said Sera right off the bat, when the surprisingly nice waitress brought their breweries and disappeared inside, hiding from the cold front. It felt nice to call Rachel that way, especially talking about her with someone so close to her. Girlfriend. Wife. A few years passed and so much had changed.

Chloe was tempted to order a beer, but it might not be well taken so was just sipping on her coke, anxiously playing with the label. "I did, yeah." She answered, ripping the edge of the paper sticker and thinking about how much of a blunder this gathering really was.

"May I ask why?"
"Because I love her."

Sera stretched on her chair looking at her closely. Chloe had transformed a lot since she had seen her last time. More tattoos, more leather, way more mature and no kid, but a woman, although the blue eyes remained innocent and trustful, just like she remembered. Good. This shouldn't be that hard.

"That's not what I'm asking about," she added, reaching for a smoke and offering Chloe one, not giving a rat's ass how old the girl was. If the kid could vote and get married, she could smoke and drink as well, as far as Sera was concerned. The blue pirate shook her head and dragged out her own pack, offering the fire. It got accepted as a courtesy though. Rachel's mother had her own lighter.

"Because…" Chloe stuttered, not sure how to explain their rapid marriage. Sera knew more than most people about their situation but telling her about Frank's notes and all the drama afterwards seemed like a bad idea. "Because I wanted to keep her safe? Like forever? And mine?" Her answers sounded like questions, as she was blasting them one by one, asking for approval. Her forehead under the beanie got sweaty. She scratched her head. "Uh… I never wanted her to question if I love her or if I'm ever gonna leave her. I won't. I don't want anybody to ever take her away from me. She wanted to be mine. Like forever."

It was somehow adorable. Sera listened carefully, not interrupting, and her eyes, as hazel as her daughter, were watching Chloe's every nervous shift and gesture. She wondered why the blue-haired girl decided to meet in the first place, but now it became plainly visible. Honesty. Guilt. Curiosity. Three kings of a lousy trade.

"Yeah, that's what I understood. Clever." She rose her eyebrow tapping out the ash. "I knew you are a smart cookie. She loves you too. I can tell."

"You don't know her that well." Chloe fired up her own smoke herself, hiding behind the flame and trying to act tough, but one hazel gaze and she huddled again, leaning over the table. She expected this meeting to be awkward, but so far it felt more like an interrogation instead. Another parent kinda talk. She was so tired of those.

"You can call it a mother's instinct. She was head over heels over you when I saw her last time. It didn't change." Sera admitted, hoping it was enough for a friendly foreword, not a big fan of a useless chit-chat. Space was safe, and no one bothered them since the waiters left. Perfect opportunity to discuss some sins of the past or choices that had been made. "So, I think we should talk." The blue confusion nodded, ripping a massive part of the coke's label. The tips of her fingernails got dirty with the sticker's red paint. Sera suspected the bottle to be completely naked when they finished.

"I think we should." It was barely a whisper, dense with anticipation.

Alright, it was time to get down to business. It wasn't the main reason why she wanted to meet this kid, but judging by how their previous encounter went, it was necessary to clear the air and maybe gather some useful information, while reading between the lines.

"I asked you to keep the whole drama with James a secret. Why didn't you follow my advice?"

"Oh…” Chloe looked at her in surprise. "Because… Because…” Ah, damn it. "I'm a terrible liar, and I can't really lie to Rach... I mean Rachel." She corrected herself quickly. "I couldn't live with the fact that she would never know and think that her dad was an amazing person or some shit. She asked me what had happened, and I just had to tell her. I couldn't just sit there and pretend that..."
everything was fine, you know?"

Sera sighed deeply.

"Chloe…" Her voice was calm and peaceful, as she tried to explain everything slowly without imposing blame. "I never wanted to keep it a secret forever. I wanted you to lie low, so I could sort things out and talk to Rachel myself. I could explain everything a little bit better than you and give her some solid advice if needed. I wanted James to think he succeeded with his little masterplan and then play my game. You told her, she overreacted, my ex-husband went crazy and I had to leave town because it got too heated." The blue trouble wasn't taking it easy, falling apart with every sentence spoken. Honesty was her biggest flaw, but she wasn't taking the harsh truth so well, even if served serenely and not rich with direct warnings.

"I had no idea. I didn't know that. I… I'm sorry."

Sera nodded and took a sip of her coffee, hiding a smirk. It wasn't about winning a dispute though, but a growing belief that Rachel had chosen right if she needed a partner who would always support her without a complaint. It was refreshing, regarding the kind of people she was used to.

"I wasn't in the best state when we talked last time so let's assume I wasn't very clear about my intentions." She added magnanimously. "Anyway, it's fine. Don't torture yourself over it. You keep my daughter happy and safe, and that's all that matters." Chloe almost jumped feeling her hand being squeezed lightly. "Anyway, how are things with James?"

That topic was way less tense. The blue rebel wouldn't mind sharing what she really thought about Rachel's father and this time she didn't have to bite her tongue. Not much anyway.

"He hates me and hates the fact that she got married so soon. He is pretty much an asshole." She stated bluntly but then blushed, ashamed that she had gone too far. "No offense."

"None taken." Sera shrugged. "I thought he was pretty fond of you though."

That was an unexpected statement. The blue rebel blinked and then sniffing lightly got back to undressing her coke bottle. The tattoo on her finger flashed with the rapid moves as the little scraps of paper were landing on the table. Sera supposedly was ignoring the name written on the skin, enjoying her smoke, observing and waiting.

"Well, not really… Maybe at the beginning, like when I was this weird friend of hers, not Rach…" Chloe swallowed hard, not sure how official she should be. "…I mean, Rachel's girlfriend or anything. When I told her about his plan and his stupid tricks with Damon, he stopped even pretending he likes me. After Rachel got into drugs and all that shit with Bowers went down, he pretty much kicked her out of the house. My mom and me... and my stepfather took care of her though. The best we could, and she became part of the family anyway. She got back on track pretty fast and got back to school too. You don't have to worry." She rose her hands in defense, leaving the bottle in peace for a second. "Anyway, James blames me for this shit. Maybe it was partly my fault or something, but I did everything…" The lit top of her smoke circled in the air when she gestured widely. The move was painful in consequences though as the ember of her cig fell off, burning her thigh exactly where the pants were ripped. The blue rebel hissed, brushing off the leftovers, almost knocking down the table. She was proud of herself though for not slipping a single F-word during the procedure.

"You did everything you could, Chloe." Her nervous monologue got generously cut off. "James always liked to blame other people for his own mistakes. He's always been like that, as long as I can remember. It helps with his self-esteem and up brings his ego to a regular, large magnitude." Sera
gave back the favor lighting up the blue cig. "He kicked her out, huh?" She asked nonchalantly, graciously pretending it was just a minor detail, not the most intriguing topic. It was great that Chloe and her parents had taken care of her daughter, but the reasons why they had to do it in the first place were way more concerning.

"Yeah." The girl responded gladly, not noticing she fell for a trap. "James wanted her to stop doing drugs and one day just threw her out of the house. Dumped on the street, just like she wasn't worth his attention. A lost cause, you know? He kinda said that he couldn't go through it again or some shit." The blue eyes flashed when she realized yet another blunder. "No offense."

"Stop apologizing, Chloe." This was adorable and cute, but Sera had enough. "None of this is your fault. I'm glad that you took care of her. Is she living with you?" A blue nod. "With your family?" Another one. "Good. Rachel is really lucky to have you. You did good, Chloe." She smiled with approval. "You did well."

The bottle of coke finally got used for what it was created. Drinking. Sera's acceptance was a friendly pat on the back, but its taste was bittersweet, regarding the circumstances. However, it wasn't about James, Rachel's drug addiction or her fallout, since they had all moved on, but a different, more painful issue. The most upsetting crap of them all.

"You think so?" Sera was literally the only person Chloe could share her doubts with. The only one. It was hella scary. "I didn't protect her from Bowers. I didn't do shit when she got addicted. I didn't stop her from seeing him and…"

"You did more than most people." Rachel's mother slewed yet another self-blaming speech. She knew the drill by now. "I didn't protect her from Bowers. I didn't do shit when she got addicted. I didn't stop her from seeing him and…"

"You did more than most people." Rachel's mother slewed yet another self-blaming speech. She knew the drill by now. "You didn't leave her."

"I'd never leave her."

Sera didn't doubt this statement. Chloe Price, even if too blunt and sometimes naïve, would never break their bond, forgetting about the girlfriend. Not in the nearest future at least, and that was all that mattered. To be frank, Sera was tempted to ask more about their relationship, but the blue pirate would start stuttering even more or even think that sharing those details would be a little bit too much. Hopefully, this whole conversation would take her a few steps closer to talk to Rachel in person and then feed her curiosity in a proper, more natural way.

So, James had kicked Rachel out. What an asshole. And she was to blame when she had left her in the car eighteen years ago? That was this inexcusable wickedness?

The waitress showed up again asking if they would like to order something to eat. Sera refused, but still willing to treat her guest. Chloe shook her head, too stressed to swallow anything except her drink. When the girl left, she finally found enough bravery to ask:

"So… What did you do to Bowers?"

"Do you really want to know?" Sera smirked, but seeing Chloe's scared gaze, shook her head. "Nothing yet. I want Rachel to decide." In her world, it would be considered rude to get justice without asking the victim for the final verdict. Bowers had to be punished, it was out of the question. Facing her daughter with that kind of choice, Sera also wanted to learn how obstinate Rachel really was and test her spirit along with the character. If they were even remotely similar in that matter, Frank could start counting his days. Or hours.

"I don't know if she'll be able to or even want to come back to it." Chloe's words made her eyebrows rise. "We went through some serious shit because of him, and everything is going so well now with
school and us and stuff. She is really happy now, you know? She got back to acting a little and found some new friends. We…” The smoke was killed quickly. The blue pirate almost burnt it down to the filter. "She doesn't want to think or talk about Bowers anymore."

Sera was watching her with her eyes narrowed. It was a very familiar look. Extremely well-known for Chloe. She was aware that the girl didn't like to be confronted with direct demands, but there was no space for leniency in that matter. This question had to be asked, and the question delivered. The only thing she couldn't get from Bowers.

"Chloe… Did he really rape her?"

The blue rebel went pale, then rubbed her eyes slowly, trying to deliver the most honest answer. Candor was a two-faced monster though. Sera had to know, although Chloe was hella aware that her response could cost Frank Bowers his life or some serious injury at least. Rachel's mother could look cool and be nice but was a damn dangerous woman, no doubt about it.

"I… I… don't know." The stutter came back. "He forced some things. I never asked about details but… I think…" It almost sounded like she was protecting this disgusting pig. Chloe shook her head. "I think he did. He did." She nodded feeling nauseous again. Jesus Christ, it was so painful to even think of it as a probability, not as a fact. "Rach never called it that way though. She just said he demanded some things when she just wanted to end the drugs and sleeping with him. I never wanted to ask, you know?" Never dared, most likely. "It was... It is... super fucked up. Still. He beat her up though. A few times." This Chloe knew for sure.

Sera put out her cig. Slowly.

"And he beat up you too."

"Yeah. It doesn't matter." Chloe waved away. It was so not important. "I know you want to meet her and stuff but if you want to ask her about this... Don't." It was a firm request, not a plea. "It's still pretty fresh and Rachel…"

Protection. That was why the girl decided to meet her after days of exchanging messages. She wanted to make sure Rachel would be safe from the uncomfortable questions or not put in an awkward position. Chloe Price gained tons of respect in Sera's eyes, who now understood her daughter's choice way better. This girl was a treasure. Rare breed. Rare kind. Still nervous as hell, nibbling the bottle's label, the blue-haired kid had enough courage to confront her asking to shut the fuck up. Not many people would have the balls to do so.

"I know. Don't worry." Sera calmed her down. "If Rachel decides not to make any decision in this case or not to talk to me, I will solve Bower's issue myself. I won't confront her with anything that might be too hard for her to take. I promise, alright?"

Chloe nodded and tried to smile. A sigh of relief got the bottle almost entirely stripped when the big piece of label fell down.

"How..." Her left leg started to dance nervously, hitting the table from below. "How do you know him? I mean how did you meet and stuff?"

"Frank?" Sera hid behind her cup of coffee. It wasn't a big secret though, a small price to pay for all the information shared already. "I met him when we were kids, well, teenagers. He ran away from home, wandered to LA and joined our little clique. We partied a lot, did drugs and drank rivers of booze. Nothing too exquisite. Then his father got sick, so Frank came back to Arcadia and got into the drug dealing business with Damon." Not only drug business but the girl didn't have to know that.
It was better to keep the story short. "We were never close friends, but I kept in touch with him especially after Rachel moved here too. Frank promised me to keep an eye on her and even went through some kind of shady trade with James to know what was going on there. I know that technically you introduced them, but I asked him to look after her anyway." And the bastard decided to bang her daughter instead, feeding her with all the pharmacy, legal or not. She grinded her teeth, still furious about lousy judgment and believing in his stories for years. When Frank willingly decided to guard Rachel, she was smitten by his dedication. Now Sera knew it wasn't just an act of kindness. Fucking Bowers was thinking with the wrong head the whole time.

"What was he telling you about Rachel?" Chloe broke into her thoughts with another exploit of curiosity.

"That she was fine. Good grades, good friends, good life." Shrug and more coffee. What else could she say? "He never mentioned the drugs or you though. Not much anyway."

The blue rebel snapped and leaned back in her chair.

"Of course, he didn't," she hissed. "He was always fucking jealous and couldn't stand the fact that we were together. I guess he also didn't expect that it would last, huh?"

It was an interesting thought. Frank had never mentioned anybody even remotely interested in her daughter, usually focusing on her supposedly calm and peaceful academic life. Drama club, charities, family picnics. No boyfriends, girlfriends or dates, just like her daughter was still twelve. Sera had never suspected that Rachel might be gay or bisexual, not getting even a scrap of information about her preferences, and the news about her marriage took her entirely by surprise. She had seen the couple years ago of course, and asked Frank about Chloe maybe once or twice, getting a polite reply that they were indeed friends, quite distant and not much engaged. Well, joke’s on him. Yet another lie for the opulent collection.

"Are you really bothered by what Frank Bowers expected to happen?" She replied calmly, not willing to share her irritation. It was mostly self-aimed anyway. "Do you know what's the main difference between you and him?"

Chloe sniffed, staking the last sip of her coke.

"That I love her, and he never did?"

"Frank didn't keep his word." Sera ignored the love declaration, not eager to get into another mushy talk. "He swore to me to protect my daughter at all costs and put her through hell instead. You saved her even though I never asked you to, and you weren't obligated by any fucking promise. So, he will pay the price, and you…" Her fingers drummed on the wooden surface. "Well, I guess we can say you got rewarded," her smile was so impish that Chloe blushed again, not sure if Sera was referring to her status or sex life.

Rewarded with Rachel. What a concept.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more," she murmured, not feeling worthy of the prize.

Could a world be a prize anyway?

Sera rolled her eyes in a very familiar manner, wondering how many times her daughter had to face a similar reaction and kick the blue pirate's ass in return. Uplifting lectures weren't her domain, so she just sighed and reached for another smoke.

"Aren't you tired of apologizing, Chloe?"
So, Rachel didn't want to think much that afternoon. And then she didn't want to think one more time. And yet again, this time with a blindfold and her hand on Chloe's mouth to keep their lack of thinking quiet or less uncomfortable for the rest of the family members. The day had ended somewhere in between, the evening passed by and they still weren't done.

The blue pirate didn't complain, willing to be drowned in passion, forgetting about the textbooks and notes, all the questions or concerns whatsoever. The need for discussion was replaced and transformed into one long song of breaths with a steady rhythm and a swing of touches. It escalated quickly, as always when they were so starving, switching from one solution to another, replaying their favorite game, where they both were winners losing only against the patience. The more something was bothering Rachel, the more possessive she became, fulfilling her every sensual fantasy and killing the unpleasant thoughts with yet another touch, another conquer or her own surrender. It was fast, impatient, fast again, frantic. Chloe. More Chloe. More them, more everything. A pure drive for distraction.

It was painfully familiar though.

*Do you want to fuck me, Price?*

Chloe tensed, recalling the dozens of similar moments when her then-girlfriend had been coming back from the wild land of parties, sneaking in and taking what she wanted, not bothered much by the side effects. Her voice had always been raspy, her touch harsh and insensitive, her bites leaving deep, red, sore marks. Chloe had been closing her eyes in those minutes, imagining an altered upshot, dreaming of a different version of the same story, hoping it would be the last and final time, and it repeated and repeated and repeated over and over.

Now the dream came true. Somehow. It took years, but it happened. Worth the wait, worth the whole pain and unsureness, although the change was so baffling sometimes.

"Rach…" she whispered.

*Do you want to fuck me, Price?*

Now, Rachel's face was buried in Chloe's neck, as every single whisper and moan, even loud and broken with a spasm, was for her girl and her only. A wild committed love letter written in sharp panting. No harsh words, no speaking, just giving herself away, accepting and avidly receiving. With her fingers tangled in the blue hair, she was careful enough not to pull too hard, paying attention, listening, caring even in her own fervor. Chloe kissed her temple, feeling a tiny smile against her shoulder and pressed her closer, harder. Change or not, being possessive was a flaw they both shared. Rachel. More Rachel. More them, more everything. The times when the passion like this had been just a rough entertainment, a demand pumped up by alcohol and a happy candy, were only a memory. The blue trouble always had a problem letting things go though, evil recalls included.

More, Rachel's hips demanded.

*Do you want to fuck me, Price?*

Chloe hissed lightly, trying to stay aware of the fact that she wasn't the convenient solution, who was always keen to serve, always addicted to the hazel charm and the sweet desire. Not the one who
loved more, but an equal and could break the act in every second, imposing her own will. Rachel changed, she had changed so much it was hard to believe, especially for a dumbass with marvelous trust issues. The first time an old drunk version of the blonde sinner asked for some favors, Chloe had been so torn, baffled by the fact that she had been used and was blaming herself for the satisfaction it had brought. Being pushed on the bed. An intoxicated laugh. A victorious smirk. This question. This demand. Just like she was using her to masturbate, not wanting to become one. Teasing. They both love to tease, but there were two kinds of this play. One was malicious, merciless and mean, the other was sweet, helping to build the tension, a concealment of promise. Rachel dropped the first option altogether, except the rare moments when they both agreed to a more refined kind of amusement, but it was still remembered.

Chloe wasn't good at letting things go.

_Do you want to fuck me, Price?_

Those words still echoed in her head, but the blue rebel shook her head slightly, bringing her touch to the next level of intensity as it was received with a soft and trembled moan.

"Hold me, baby." She heard instead. A soft, shaken plea. "Hold me."

And Chloe did, burying her fingers in the blonde hair, pressing her harder onto herself, feeling the desperate grasp, the frantic breath and the sweet tensing of Rachel's body on top of her. It wasn't just her girl coming, but coming for her and because of her, of them together. It wasn't a single player Amber game though. Same outcome, different meaning. 180 degrees change.

This piercing sting in her chest when Chloe was seeing it happening. Sharp, sharp, so hard and then slowly getting loose.

"You. Oh, you." It was the first whisper. A little bit dreamy, filling with fatigue and muffled by the sweaty blonde locks. Rachel was right though. Moments like that were damn effective when it came to forgetting about everything, including wicked memories and complicated hitches of the future. "My god, baby..."

"Uh-huh." Chloe hummed in response, still smitten by the view, or to be frank, lack of any. A long time ago, Rachel would just get up or turn around not willing to even look straight into the blue eyes, a little bit embarrassed by the aftermath and its execution. Now, her blonde angel, damn tired and with a wild racing mustang instead of a heart, wanted to lift herself up just to see her wife. She was refused though, still held closely as Chloe loved to feel the weight of her whole body, every breath and small shivers after. "Stay. Just for a moment."

A kiss to her neck was her only reply as Rachel was calming down, wiping the blue hair out of her pirate's forehead. "You like me sweaty and worn-out, huh?"

"I like you on top of me." Chloe sniffed and bit her lip hearing a quiet giggle. "I like you all mine."

"That's a given." Rachel smiled against her lips when she kissed her slowly. It was tender and soft but didn't last long as she finally sat back looking for a bottle of water. It was indeed a carnal marathon today, and her throat was getting painfully dry even if the reason was more than gratifying. The shadows drowned a sharp, straight line of her silhouette against the dim light as she leaned over the pillows, shamelessly naked and exhausted as hell.

They watched each other in silence, exchanging smirks and charmed by the atmosphere. Rachel winked. Chloe threw back her head with a defiant grin.
"Damn. Rach... Did I tell you how beautiful you are?" she murmured caressing the side of her thigh and watching her girl drinking almost the whole bottle. Somebody really made her thirsty, guess who it was?

"You mentioned something once or twice. It's the water thing I assume." Rachel wiped her lips but then took another sip. Damn, her throat was really sore. "It always gets you."

"True." The blue pirate confirmed thinking about something intensely. It would be a shame to break this intimate moment, and she was damn grateful for all the distraction although her mind decided to feed again on its favorite meal of the day. Problems. Like talking. Like issues. Questions. "Eh... Rach..." she stuttered. "After the whole school thing... What do you want to do?"

Rachel frowned, taken aback by such a down to earth question. To be honest, this issue was occupying her mind a lot of lately. It was about time to discuss those things, confront their expectations and plan something. Senior year, November, tests, and applications. They couldn't stay in this room forever, spending time at the beach or visiting the junkyard. Even Joyce was asking them what was next.

"College, as you probably assumed." She stated, not sure of Chloe's intentions. This conversation could go very well or extremely bad, depending on what a certain social delinquent wanted to do in a few months from now. "Unless I'm gonna miraculously get pregnant and I would have to drop my plans, and you would work your ass off to support me and our magical lesbian baby."

"I'm serious." The blue gaze softened a little, and it usually meant Chloe got shy. Or worried. Or summoned her inner teddy bear. "Blackwell doesn't hold a law program."

Rachel took another sip playing with the cap with her finger. The plastic bottle squeaked getting empty so quickly. "It doesn't."

"We will have to move." Pause. Chloe hesitated. "Leave Arcadia."

The sheets rustled quietly when her blonde girl moved closer. They had been dreaming of leaving this shitty town for years, but the blue tone was marked with sadness and unsureness. Did she want to stay here? What was on her mind?

"It doesn't seem so alluring now, does it?" said Rachel carefully, trying to read between the gasps of air, probing the blue intentions, outwit her blue pirate. There was no hidden agenda, no secret plan on her part, but uncertainty. This suspense was killing her, literally.

What was next?

"It was always a dream and now... it's planning." Chloe's fingers strolled through the curve of her hips, traveled up to the waist, and then retreated a little, not willing to start another round or a set of many. This was way more important, for both of them, mandatory. She hated planning though, and everything she was thinking about lately required a lot of it. Like, a shitload.

"Plans can also be alluring. I have one in mind." Rachel peered at her with an impish smirk, clearly suggesting that they hadn't reached the finish line in their wanton marathon. The blue fingers stopped their stroll, trying not to provoke more. They both sighed. It was time to get serious. "What about you, baby?"

Switch, click, green light. The blue pirate was hoping for this question and got even more anxious when it appeared. Still puzzled, Chloe's hand restarted the journey. She loved the touch of her skin just after. The inked dragon on Rachel's calf was certainly wanting to be pet. Here you go, you
"College, I guess. Unless the same shit with babies and support." She groaned and shifted her shoulders, hoping that Rachel would keep being so supportive. Not that her girl was anything but reassuring lately but the news might be the last nail to the coffin of her endurance. Alright, enough with testing those waters. "Oh god. Yeah, alright, college. I don't work my ass off for nothing. No, it's not about your father and his expectations about me, or more like no expectations. It's about my stuff and our future. Why is it funny?" She frowned hearing first a light chuckle, then seeing her wife bursting in laughter. "Rachel! Stop! Stop... And it's a secret, don't you tell anybody. College, school, yes. Here you go. You won. Got me there, happy? The question is which one would we pick?" The last line was supposed to be nonchalant, but Chloe got edgy a little.

Rachel thought for a while, considering her options. She had so many that it would require a severe flow chart to cover them all; however, it was better to start with the simplest and most versatile ones. Just take it easy. Chloe, even if now an avid student, had hated school for years and the blonde concern wasn't sure how much her eagerness in academic pursuit would last and by what it was fueled. Her wife could deny as much as she wanted but impressing the Ambers and James paying for their education was damn good motivation. Everybody would like to prove him wrong, especially after all the harsh words he had said, showing how low he thought of the blue pirate. She succeeded in this dare, winning Blackwell with her hard work and natural talents but college was an entirely different story.

"I really don't care. It has to be the same city or state at least. I don't really do well away from you. But the school... maybe even something local..." Rachel shrugged. "I don't know."

"Oh, c'mon!" Her girl frowned, not believing her ears. "Don't tell me you haven’t thought about it. No Stanford, Yale, Berkeley?"

Damn. That was cruel, like poking a beast of unspoken wishes, which was safely asleep for months now. Of course, she had thought about those expensive, sophisticated colleges. Of course, she had checked the requirements, tuitions, programs, and credits, especially that Blackwell was an excellent and private facility, so most of the students were expected to at least try to apply to those prominent universities. Rachel, even if tempted, was reluctant to even mention those destinations, since Chloe wasn’t a big fan of continuing her education whatsoever. Saying ‘Yale’ would frighten her more than a jump scare in a haunted house.

"Might be too expensive for a young married couple," she specified carefully, trying to convince them both that it would be safer to try something more ordinary. "I'm not sure if my father would still be so open about financing my education. Don't worry, baby," Rachel calmed her girl quickly, forgetting how much Chloe liked to burden herself with any big expense. "I'm sure I can score a good scholarship if I really want to. Same with you. You already got one at Blackwell. I was always the privileged rich kid."

Her girl nodded, playing with the edge of the blanket and shredding it thread after thread. She loved to destroy some innocent object when nervous or apprehensive. So, Rachel didn’t want to go big, ah bummer. She would laugh her ass off then. Fine. This idea was a fucking laughingstock anyway.

The spark of nervousness disappeared under the blue eyelids.

"Now you are as poor as me." She sniffed. "Well... eh... I was thinking MIT."

Rachel almost choked on the last sip of water.

"Whoa... Who did I get married to?"
"A dork?" Chloe was still destroying her beloved pirate blanket. "The tuition might kill me... Well, us... But... But we will see... I guess."

The hazel eyes were watching her intensely for a long while. Was her rebel really serious? It was one of the world-famous scientist schools and the best in the country, located on the other coast, thousands of miles away from home. Not that Rachel would doubt her girl's abilities or talents, always hoping that Chloe would at least try to attend college, but this idea seemed way too astounding, just like a fantasy. She was impressed, sure, but also baffled and weirdly uncomfortable. Was it because of James? Was it another try to impress him? Oh, he would be damn impressed, sure, but was it really something her girl wanted to do? Them running away from town with a rusty truck and no money felt more in place than this. Being the keepers of a small town's junkyard was more realistic. When did her amazing blue treasure change so much? How? Why? Was it still... her Chloe?

It was certainly an answer Rachel hadn't seen coming.

"No secret plans, my ass." A good, nice smoke was her only solution. Her girl applying to MIT. Jesus fucking Christ. What did she miss? "Massachusetts is damn fucking cold though," she said finally completely puzzled and tried to break the silence with a click of her zippo. "You will freeze your ass off..." Moving there was opening more possibilities for her as well. Opportunities that were very questionable before, and Rachel waved them away, especially after being expelled from Blackwell and not keeping her record extremely straight. Imagining them though was one thing, wishful thinking only. Now it was... planning.

Chloe got it right. Planning sucked. Planning was hella scary.

Their taciturnity was getting scratchier with every second passed. Usually, they would just resume their passionate exercise trying to hide their bafflement, but it didn't seem fitting. Sera's issue seemed so lovely and fluffy compared to this news. College talk was a good thing though. A good change. Change. Her baby changed. Like for real. Oh god.

I'm a junkyard trash, Amber. Take it or leave it.

Where did this careless rebel go?

"You will have to warm it up." Chloe chucked. "If you don't want me to, if you want to go local..."

"Don't be ridiculous, baby." Rachel's hand stopped her from getting up, turning away or wherever she tried to escape now. "Alright, I thought about Harvard before." She confessed with a grey inhale. "Everybody who ever started a pre-law program did. I just wasn't sure how fine you would be with moving so far away, and I didn't pressure you. I won't go there by myself, no fucking way. It has to be our decision." She almost wanted Chloe to say she was joking. Almost. Then again, they were married, planning their future, preparing for a whole life together. MIT was one of the best choices out there, so was the famous law school behind Johnston gate.

"Sacrificing your future for a social delinquent?"

She smacked Chloe's arm, accidentally spreading ash all around the bed.

"I'm not sacrificing anything, and don't you dare talk about my wife like that unless you want some empty beer bottles to start flying."

The only empty bottle around was quickly moved far away, just in case. The blue shyness didn't want to risk any broken glass. "I can't promise I will get in." A kiss to Rachel's shoulder should be
enough to stifle the blonde fury. "It's not like MIT gives away scholarships like candies."

If somebody told Rachel six months ago that they would discuss the top universities in the country, she would either scoff or laugh her ass off. On the other hand, she didn't plan to change her name either. Her expectations were escalating fast, just like the speed of her smoking. She opened another bottle of water not sure what to think.

*I’m a junkyard trash, Amber.*

"Neither does Harvard." Her smoke was stolen for one, long drag. This blue thief, first her heart now her distraction. "So that was the big thing you were hiding for days? You want to apply?"

Chloe nodded again. Kinda. It was tough to say what she was trying to do, still hesitant about the reception. Rachel seemed supportive but also a little bit afraid, and the blue rebel wasn't entirely sure why. Moving to Massachusetts would help her girl as well though. She could try to get in to all those fancy schools there, and if somebody really deserved it, it was Rachel Amber, now Price. All the extra activities, drama club, charities, the resume filled with gold stars and great grades could finally pay off. If her wife didn't get accepted into Harvard, no one would. Then again, maybe Rachel didn't want to, because of her father and stuff. James Amber graduated from Stanford, another expensive school. Perhaps his daughter didn't want to follow in his footsteps or was tired of studying to that magnitude. Those colleges requested all of their students to bury themselves in the books since day one and resurrect as human beings after graduation. Or never. Maybe it wasn't for Rach.

Fine. Alright. Like it was a big deal, but they didn't have to do anything, it was just talking and shit. Nothing final or ultimate and her blonde angel was looking at her like she saw her for the first time in her life. Eh, it was weird.

Strange.

"I want to try to apply, but I won't do it if you don't want me to..."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Chloe!" Rachel rolled her eyes, losing all her tolerance to mushy bullshit. "If you really want to, of course, I want you to! Let's be honest, do you really think I would say no to my wife who wants to score big in education? Me? Who do you think I am?"

*I’m a junkyard trash, Amber.*

Fuck that shit. Rachel scratched her forehead. "Not to mention that I can think about Harvard seriously right now," she confessed. "It's great news, did you lose your mind or something?"

Actually, the whole conversation seemed insane from the get-go. Chloe rubbed her neck, stretching a little. "Alright," she replied. "What if you will get in and I won't?" Despite their grades and all the hard work, it was still a possibility. Thousands of people applied every year, and rejection was more common than the admission. MIT didn't need Chloe Price, they could survive without knowing about her existence.

Rachel's lips tasted like fresh tobacco and strawberry pie.

"Then you will get bored to death in our apartment listening to my rants about how much I hate school, the law school especially. But don't worry, you will get in, I've seen your grades." Chloe's SAT and ACT scores were exceptional, to put it mildly. She had been really working her ass off. "Twinkle, twinkle little scientist star. Why are you surprised? I warned you that I would check your scores, remember?"

The last words broke the weird tension. Chloe fell on the pillows with a wide and surprising smile,
spreading her hands widely. Her girl ditched her smoke, intrigued by that reaction, and wrapping herself in a blanket moved closer to her blue treasure, waiting for enlightenment. The cigarette died in the ashtray with the last profound breath, covering them both in a thick, dense mist, violating their vision.

"An apartment." Rachel heard only, with her eyes still itchy from the bushy fog.

"What?"

"You said apartment." Her girl smirked, evidently amused by the idea. Moving out would apparently have some perks after all. "Like, our place and shit."

The fact that her blue trouble had never thought about their own private space or forgotten about this need was bewildering and annoying at the same time. Chloe's mind was really one-sided and focusing on Sera along with school was more than enough for the confused rebel. She was beating herself up with this college thing for weeks, now discovering that it would also mean no angry mothers entering their room asking to help with dinner, no stepfathers complaining about them being goddamn loud or fucking Victoria Chase giving them a lecture titled 'How to not be that gay of a neighbor 101.'

"Yes, of course, an apartment or a house," Rachel ran fingers through her hair, hiding a smile. She already had a few requests in mind about how the Price residence would look like. "I'm not planning to be homeless or live in your truck. We'll have to find something, not to mention that Harvard and MIT are two different schools, so no dorms." Oh god, she really said it aloud. Two big names in one sentence. "I'm so sick of dorms. I want to have a normal decent bathroom we could fucking enjoy and to have my own kitchen that is not sticky and filthy as hell, and you can burn your eggs and bacon there, or spill your cereal every morning."

Her girl frowned swiftly at this unjust accusation. "I don't spill my cereal!"

"Well, unless we have a threesome once a week that I'm not aware of, you are the only one to blame." Rachel scoffed, remembering how Captain Crunch's remains almost cost her a considerable bruise or a broken ankle. Her wife was amazing, beautiful, cute and wonderful but eating her breakfast in a rush wasn't her domain.

"You can blame me as much you want at our own place." The blue cereal fan sniffed, guilty as charged. "A threesome you say..." She added with a naughty smirk, tired of this talk, even if the outcome was kinda satisfying. It would be nice to distract Rachel before she would start talking about the patterns of the wallpapers and curtains' colors. Or cleaning. In general.

"Don't you even try." The hazel flashed in flames in a blink of an eye. "I'm way too greedy." Oh, snap, she fell for it. Chloe's grin appeared immediately as she moved forward, and then Rachel found herself nailed to the bed with her hands pinned on top of her head with some blue pirate straddling her with pure satisfaction. She tried to free herself from the grasp, but the struggle was more a matter of habit than an actual demand. It was all part of the game that they had invented years ago and Chloe knew the limits very well, ready to let Rachel go if asked.

"Oh, I wouldn't share those treasures, forget about it." The blanket got slowly pulled down as the blue rebel uncovered her land to conquer. Even a slight mention of Rachel being touched by anybody else was making her blood boil. "You are hella mine." A possessive kiss. "Only mine."

Another one, with nipping Rachel's bottom lip slightly. "And that's the only thing you are allowed to fuck for the rest of your life." Chloe poked at her chest, grinning again. "Sorry to disappoint you."
Her girl wrested beneath her more forcefully, now adding a few hisses to the fighting soundtrack. She got outraged though, as always when her wife was questioning her own value or suggesting something along James Amber's favored lines. Chloe changed, sure, but every time the blue pirate felt uncomfortable or sheepish, had to drop a bomb of low self-esteem. First MIT, now this. What a joke.

"Chloe, sometimes you're so fucking stupid." Rachel snapped, losing the struggle again. "A disappointment? Really?"

Her girl just laughed out loud not letting her go.

"Joking. And speaking of the nearest future, what did you to this blindfold?" She looked around damn serious, brushing off the ash from the crumpled sheets. Enough with this school talk. It was time to steer this ship against the current and focus on some sweet distraction.

"Oh, you…" Rachel wriggled for a second more, but then gave up when she noticed the black piece of fabric in her girl's fingers. Keeping with this rage in those circumstances was hard. "You…” She sighed licking her chapped lips and showing that this fort was captured already. "Damn…”

"I wouldn't say it better," Chloe whispered, covering Rachel's sight and serving a kiss in total darkness. They both knew where it was going though, even if steering blind. "Damn indeed."

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Walking into the school bathroom, especially with an intention to break down completely, required some distinct groundwork. First, the door had to be locked and blocked so no one could get in, even if begging, jerking and yanking the handle. Second, the premises had to be checked carefully and emptied if occupied by some lost souls. Third, it would be lovely to prepare some soft tissues so the smudged makeup could be removed just after the meltdown, not spoiling the skin. Falling apart was one thing, having nasty bags under her eyes was another.

Victoria Chase got used to this routine lately and was very skillful in its execution. Crying alone rarely was kept secret for long, but she proudly managed to survive a few weeks already without being too conspicuous. Almost ready to proceed, she stopped when a quiet murmur threw her out of balance. Damn, this place wasn't vacant. She frowned, looking around, putting her purse on the counter and wiping away the first tears. It was getting harder to control her emotions; the extensive training didn’t benefit her much.

The stalls were empty, as proved before. Her heels clicked loudly on the tiled floor when she walked to the end of the bathroom, intrigued, annoyed, and a little bit afraid. Was it Samuel or some security bastard? Perhaps she was spied on? Those bitches hanging with her could pretend to be her BFFs, but she knew they were dying to discover what she was up to.

A rustle movement, a sniff, a small shift. Victoria touched the metal wall, getting closer. A few more steps. Exhale. Inhale. Pause. It was getting ridiculous though. She wasn’t afraid of anybody, not in this safe space. Scoffing at herself, she finally lurked over the corner and then sighed with pure relief.

“What are you doing here, Max?”
The little freckle blinked, rubbing her hoodie’s laces, not even trying to get up or hide from the watchful gaze. The floor had to be cold, uncomfortable, and probably dirty, but Max couldn’t care less. Sitting behind the bathroom stalls in a dark, janitor’s corner and becoming a grey, gloomy shadow, she could easily avoid all the students storming in and out, not noticing her presence. It was her spot, marked as the place for weeping, a misery dot on Blackwell’s map.

Both girls watched each other for a moment.

“Same as you,” Max responded simply. “Crying.”

“I’m not crying, Caulfield.”

“Me neither,” the little freckle wasn’t breaking down much lately, unable to produce any more tears, despite her struggles and an actual need to do so. Her eyes, even if bone dry, decided to remain red and puffy regardless. She didn’t care about her looks though, but it was still unfair. “Is it about Nathan?” She dared to ask, not expecting any answer but hoping that would scare the fashion snake away. Remaining alone wasn’t overrated.

Victoria turned her head away.

“Why are you suddenly so interested in my relationship with Prescott? Nosey much?” She jeered but stayed in place, not believing that Caulfield had balls to actually ask, although the whole school knew that her bond with Nathan was in trouble, to put it mildly. Some assholes said it was because of her being a cold bitch, others were joking that the prince was done with waiting for her V-card. Even her friends were gossiping about young Prescott treating Victoria like a sworn foe and pitying her attempts to make the situation better. It was detrimental for her reputation since the most popular guy in school started to attack her publicly, but secretly she felt betrayed and hurt. Fuck, even Max knew something was off. It was getting worse.

“Uh, sorry.” She heard the little mouse whispering. “Just thought you would like to chat with somebody… you know…”

“Creepy?”

“No.” Max rubbed her arms nervously. “Like… you know… a stranger?”

It wasn’t a bad idea. Well, technically it was, but Victoria found herself willing to share what was bothering her, at least just a little. Her life had always been organized, perfectly managed, and every emotion, every single feeling had its own label and dedicated container, to put in and lock down if needed. Now, this annoying devilish load was stomping on this order, destroying it so easily, like a sand castle, leaving her with pieces that didn’t match each other, bits and scraps only. Unable to find her way out, she became one of those she had always despised. A sad bathroom girl. Pathetic. Her friends were useless, Nathan gained an enemy status, and she couldn’t reach her therapist the whole week, as the asshole decided to get some tan in Haiti. Max was no one in Blackwell, not really talking to anybody popular, and even if she shared her secrets, no one would believe her. Safe spot. Crying was getting impractical anyway.

“He is just acting weird.” Victoria pouted her lips preparing her speech on the fly, but this presentation got out of control quite quickly. It wasn’t easy to restrain herself, especially facing… well, a stranger. “He is going absolutely bat-shit crazy. One day he is nice, calls me or asks for my opinion, on the other he can change into a disrespectful, fucking monster. Nathan is…” She almost broke down but composed herself with a few short breaths. Caulfield might be nobody, but no one should see her falling apart. That would be rock bottom. “I really thought he was my friend, a
kindred spirit and... I don’t really know what to think of it now.”

Max nodded sadly focusing on the laces again.

“Did he hit you?” she asked, and it stumped Victoria with a short, shrill shiver. She lowered her head, thinking way too long and hoping that Max wouldn’t read her mind racing a hundred miles per hour.

“No. Of course not.” His hands on her throat with the old baseball bat. The rage. The moment three days ago when he almost slapped her. Almost. Almost. So close. Almost happened. Saying how sorry he was didn’t matter. Nathan could be apologetic in one moment, transforming into a raging beast in another. Victoria had always been laughing at those girls complaining about abusive boyfriends or fathers, blatantly blaming them for their own misfortune. They could escape, right? They could stand their ground, call their friends or just leave. Simple. Not so simple as Victoria Chase learned. Not simple at all. “He wouldn’t dare…”

The little freckle pondered for a while. Nathan was losing his mind faster than expected. She knew why, or suspected at least, but doubted Victoria would believe her story. Her own friends along with her girlfriend didn’t want to take her warnings seriously so the queen of Blackwell would just laugh her off, calling crazy. Maybe she knew more about Prescott’s sick needs and his relations with Jefferson but wouldn’t admit it so effortlessly. That was severe shit, and if Victoria was really aware of what was happening she would call the police or inform her parents at least. She either didn’t know or didn’t care. One or another. If it was true though. If Jefferson was still the one to blame. If anything horrid was happening in this timeline as well. If.

Whatever was going on between the school’s most prominent couple, Victoria needed to be careful. Nathan could be dangerous, with his art teacher and mentor around or not. He hurt Kate and had been seen around Kelly as well. What a coincidence, right? The fashion snake could be next and, and in that regard, their fallout might actually be a good thing, even if she was taking it poorly. Max didn’t want another tragedy on her conscience though, her record was more than full.

“How do you know?” The queen of Blackwell asked quietly, affirming Max’s suspicions.

“How do you know?” The queen of Blackwell asked quietly, affirming Max’s suspicions.

“Do you remember Samantha Myers?”

“Do you remember Samantha Myers?”

“No...” Victoria’s eyebrow furrowed. “Oh, wait. The freshman who disappeared a few years ago? Yeah, I remember her. She switched schools or something.” Why did Max even care? She wasn’t around when Sam was so desperately trying to hit on Nathan, following him around like an unruly puppy. Then she had some kind of accident and disappeared. Victoria always assumed that Sam couldn’t stand young Prescott’s rejection or failed some of her classes. She was pretty slow though, and no one liked her. Even Price, usually hanging with every creature pigeonholed as an outcast, was avoiding Myers. Why would this girl be significant? Why did she even exist and was mentioned?

“Find her and ask her what happened three years ago after the play.” Max politely delivered yet another golden advice. Grey hoodie of wisdom, what a joke.
“What play?”

“She will know.” Her freckles flashed in the dim light when she shrugged. “You will know too. Maybe…” Max paused, thinking. “Maybe she knows the others too.” To her knowledge, Samantha was the first known victim of Nathan’s rage. She tried to dig into this case some time ago but wasn’t very successful. Myers vanished in thin air, covering all her tracks and not even using any social media. Max’s resources were limited though, and she had lost her patience, absorbed by her own personal commotion. Victoria could reach Sam way easier. If she put effort into it. If she wanted it. If.

The fashion snake frowned again, crossing her arms on her chest. She didn’t like where it was going. Fuck, this girl could be more clear and precise, at least once. What was it, a game? A challenge? Some kind of kind of fantasy quest she was sending her on?

“She do you have to talk riddles, Caulfield?” She scoffed. “Are you masturbating to it or something? Like, is it turning you on?”

Even if hidden in the shadow of her hoodie, Max couldn’t hide her smile. “No, but if you’re turned on, pleasure is all mine.”

“Fuck off.” Victoria straightened up, shaking her head and tossing back a few lost blond locks. Her reaction woke up another smirk, this time carefully covered. Max didn’t want to make her furious, but it was quite amusing to throw her off balance. The fashion snake adjusted her short, black skirt, still taken aback and thinking how grateful she was that this conversation was extremely private. It was time for revenge, or she should say, a return of the favor. “So, you and Steph are no longer an item?”

Max bit her lip and started to stroke the laces again. The tortured strings were so worn-out that they could tear apart at any moment. Of course, Victoria knew. Everybody knew. Steph wasn’t flagrantly avoiding her, making an effort to be friendly and respectful, but it spoke volumes more than a good old fight in the middle of a school hallway. Blackwell’s horde sensed their problems quickly, addicted to the stench of drama, always willing to discuss somebody else’s life. Even if they both were very private, gay relationships were rare in Arcadia Bay, so everybody knew them and even felt entitled to share their opinion on their sudden breakup. Steph was also very anxious lately, occupied by something entirely different so it fueled the gossips with a new, intense flame. Max had no idea that they could be such an interesting topic for people who didn’t even notice their existence on a daily basis.

“I guess we’re not. I’m not quite sure. She moved out and…” It wasn’t getting easier to talk about it, even if thinking didn’t hurt that much. “…And I don’t know if she will ever come back.”

“So, make her come back?” Victoria suggested. She tried to be helpful, even if Max’s issue was an entirely unknown territory.

“How?”

The fashion snake shrugged and shifted her position quickly, trying to look prominent and wise. Leaning over the sink wasn’t very comfortable, but the bathroom didn’t offer any decent seats, except the toilets of course. Them conversating in a metal stall would be even more awkward.

“I don’t know, I don’t speak gay.” She stated impatiently. “Like invite her for dinner or buy her flowers.”

Max almost burst into laughter imagining her ex-girlfriend’s face, treated in a manner just described
by the queen of Blackwell. Not that Steph didn’t like dating or was against any romantic gestures but winning her over in such a way seemed absurd.

“She would flip the fuck out.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Victoria was getting lost. Then her eyes narrowed as she leaned forward. “Or is there somebody else?”

Her black bag marked with a Seattle sticker moved on the floor loudly, as Max huddled in her corner. This dirty look was giving her chills, even if Chase was pretty much harmless.

“As far as I know, she is still single. Kinda.” She gestured. “Like with me but single.” Practically they were still together. It was just a break, not a final stage. One big fat lie though. It had died weeks ago, but they were both too disinclined to attend the funeral.

“Oh, I’m talking about you, Caulfield.”

Silence. A long silence without a single movement or yanking those damn laces. Max held her breath for a good minute, then exhaled loudly, getting up. She was done with the mourning session and started to miss being left alone. Victoria Chase was still waiting for a response, like a hawk on a hunt, ready to prey on every small bit of news or a whisper.

“Uh, no,” she murmured.

The fashion snake chuckled, playing with her necklace. So, this little mouse was crying her eyes out over somebody new. Her and Steph’s thing was really water under the bridge. New gay gossip. Intriguing.

“That wasn’t suspicious at all,” she summarized, pleased with her advantage. Dragging out people’s secrets was her favorite activity, except being the one in charge.

“You are my neighbor, Victoria,” Max responded as gently as her nerves let her. Showing a sign of irritation would set the luxurious and expensive Chase’s alarm off. She dusted off her pants, showing she was ready to leave this place. “We live door by door. You are probably more aware of my sex life than me and I’m sure you would be the first to know if I was with somebody else.”

Victoria hummed, thinking intensely. True, she wouldn’t miss it or would be quickly informed about the game change. It wasn’t the right time or place to actually admit it, so she just blamed her regular scapegoats.

“Perhaps, if Amber and Price, ah I’m sorry, Price squared…” It was so annoying that Rachel had changed her last name. Disrespectful. “…didn’t act like horny animals deafening everybody around with their… sounds.” She blurted out the last word showing her displeasure. Fuck, this girl was friends with them, it would be clever to suspend her rants about a certain married couple. “And I don’t know anything about your sex life, Max. You have always been very discreet, thank God.”

“So have you.” Max nodded a little bit too eagerly. “Same thing. With thanking God, I mean.” It was quite nice actually to talk to Victoria, and, despite her being a bitch 24/7, she indeed showed some signs of being a decent human being. The little freckle knew this proud and overbearing girl had a soft side as well, but it would take hours of similar talks to get to see it. Seeking it wasn’t Max’s priority, so she easily dismissed the temptation.

The fashion snake didn’t call off her hunt though.
“Is something going on between you and Price?” Oh fuck, Victoria had to specify. “Chloe Price?”

The famous card, the well-known accusation. First Steph, then Chloe herself, now Chase? Who would be next? Maybe Rachel also would like to ask the same question, replaying it over and over like a broken record. It would be way easier to confirm the suggestions, even if not true, and go with it, just for her peace of mind.

It would be a lie though. One big, fat lie.

“Why is everybody assuming that there is something between her and me?” It was close, but Max held her horses and didn’t snap. Not yet. “She is married and my best friend, like a childhood friend. We’ve known each other since we were like 6.”

Only the guilty ones would provide such an insightful and extensive explanation. Victoria’s eyes changed into two tiny green lines.

“You hang out a lot.”

“As friends,” Max sighed, still avoiding direct eye contact. It wasn’t about the issue itself, but she hated the interrogation vibe, feeling cornered and trapped by the lack of her own social skills. She didn’t have to confront anybody for months, and even if it wasn’t an art she was entirely unfamiliar with, Max had gotten out of practice.

Victoria wouldn’t let her leave though.

“Still, you hang out a lot.” She smirked, trying to be sympathetic and failed miserably. Lack of practice. Oh, well. Happens. “Especially lately. The whole queer part of the school is obsessed with her. It’s fine if you’re too. I won’t tell anybody.” She really wouldn’t. First, Victoria would have to admit that such a discussion had taken place. Second, she would have to agree that she expressed interest in Max Caulfield’s love life. More than enough to keep quiet.

If she expected a confession, the hooded mouse wasn’t keen on gifting her with one.

Somebody started to bang on the door very loudly and, judging by the vocabulary and profanities yelled, it was an urgent problem. Victoria didn’t even move though. There were other bathrooms. She was onto something and wanted to know more. She needed to.

“I’m not obsessed with Chloe,” Max stated very clearly and with visible annoyance. “As I said, we’re just buddies. The fact that we both like girls doesn’t mean we want to get into each other’s pants. Really. I don’t think you want to jump on every guy around just because you’re straight.” A comparison worked better than a metaphor. However, it didn't sidetrack Victoria.

“Don’t tell me it’s Amber, please. Is it Amber?”

Max rolled her eyes and leaned over the wall, covered in offensive graffiti and interesting statements about the students’ sex life. Some judgments, some gossips, a few dicks and a call-out. Usual. It was a damn suitable theme for this conversation. Repeating the same explanation wouldn’t do Max any good, so the little freckle just sighed deeply and said very slowly, straining her words. “Victoria, I’m upset because my girlfriend moved out and I don’t know if I will be able to ever win her back. I’m upset because I messed things up between us and I don’t know how to fix them. You can recite the pantheon of Blackwell gays as much as you want but there is no one else that I’m interested in, even remotely. Even you.” She sneered, wondering if she didn’t go too far.

“That was rude,” Victoria sniffed.
The banging on the door got louder. Jesus, it would be faster to run to the other side of the school than being so unashamedly stupid. Pee somewhere else, what was the problem?

“I’m sorry.” The hoodie’s laces got pulled again. “I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

Somehow the last few sentences were an icebreaker. They both chuckled and then smiled lightly. Max wondered if she had ever seen Victoria grinning and had to admit that either her memory was failing her, or it hadn’t occurred. Chase had a really charming smile, she should use it more often. It was easier to win people’s hearts that way than being a mean bitch and the little freckle wondered if she should complement her or leave it to beaver. Victoria could really benefit from being kind and gentle. If she put some effort into it. If she wouldn't guard herself that hard. If.

“You didn’t.” Just when Max was about say something very uplifting, the fashion snake picked up her purse and quickly walked to the door, obviously ashamed. She had shown too much. Way too much. “I’m gonna go now. Good luck with your girlfriend.”

“Thank you.” Max nodded. “Good luck with Nathan. One way or another.”

The banging on the door stopped as suddenly as it had started. Poor soul decided to find relief somewhere else. Perfect timing to get out of there unnoticed. Victoria didn’t want to lose this opportunity.

“Thanks. And Max?” She turned around unlocking the gate, hoping that the corridor would be empty. “We’re not friends or anything.”

The little freckle watched her for a second too long.

“We are not, Victoria,” she agreed finally. “We are just strangers.”

“Good.” The door slammed, and Max was left alone. Strangers. Yes, they were strangers, but they both kept wondering what if.

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“So, what’re your plans with my daughter now?” Sera was done with her fish and chips, preferring to smoke and finalize this meeting with a few supposedly harmless questions. Chloe, who was still savoring her meal in an enormously fast pace, was way more relaxed and finally ready for some serious grilling. They didn’t really plan to order any food, but the waitress was getting awfully annoying, asking every ten minutes if they needed anything else. The poor working girl couldn’t take no for an answer, so they finally ordered a few things. It was getting colder too, so it wasn’t a stupid idea to get some local specials and judge hard about what this restaurant had to offer.

“Graduation.” A bite. “College.” Yet another. “She wants to be a lawyer.”

“A lawyer?” Sera’s eyebrow flew up, almost as high as her exhale. She had always imagined her daughter more involved with the arts than in serious business. James’ influence had to be more profound than expected. Damn asshole.

“Not my idea.” Chloe wiped her greasy fingers in a napkin with a big, obnoxious logo. This place branded everything, even forks and glasses. “I guess she wanted to be an actor or a model before, but she dropped those plans after all this drug crap. So that’s it for now except…” Sera was still waiting
for something. Oh God, plans. She wanted to know their plans. “… Eh... except leaving this shitty
house? Have a kid. Maybe.”

Chloe lost her appetite. It was about time, the plate was hella empty regardless. The answers were on
point she guessed, since Rachel’s mother didn’t watch her obsessively anymore. Alright, they were
getting somewhere. The blue pirate wasn’t sure about this house and kid thing, couldn’t even
imagine that stage nor wanted to, but all the parents had this exasperating custom of asking about
their life’s blueprint. So far, Chloe hoped for the school thing to work out and for more nice
evenings, with Netflix and without much clothes. Not something she could share with any of their
mothers though.

“Are you fine with money?” Sera asked still observing her daughter’s wife. Impressive ideas, she
expected something way less boastful. It seemed that the girls really wanted to make it work. A
lawyer and a punk pirate. Interesting.

“I can provide,” Chloe straightened up proudly, and it almost cost Sera a chuckle.

“I’m sure you can,” she replied totally disarmed with the prominent sparkle in the blue eyes. “Do you
need any money? Either of you? Both of you?”

Chloe got abashed, looking sadly at the French fries’ remains. She wouldn’t mind keeping herself
busy with yet another portion. Eating required less talking, and conversation about money was the
last thing she needed. Meeting Rachel’s mother was a stretch. Accepting any kind of financial aid
would be way too much.

“James is paying Rachel some kind of alimony. I don’t know how much. He paid for the school, for
mine too, if you believe it.” The decision to describe their economic situation was received with
gratitude. Sera probably wanted to know what kind of conditions Rachel was living in and if she
needed anything. “We are fine though. I make a decent buck renovating vintage cars with my
stepdad too. We won’t starve or anything,” the blue pirate stated. Sera might have a dope car and a
shitload of cash, but her daughter was fine, like really fine. No need to throw the greens in their
direction.

“What about college?”

Uh.

“I’m applying for a scholarship.” Parents talk equaled school shit. It was a matter of time when Joyce
would start her own interrogation. She could sense it coming. “Rachel will try too. She is aiming
high of course.”

Predictable. Sera didn’t expect anything less from her daughter. However, even if she wasn’t an
expert when it came to scholarships, according to her knowledge, Rachel might have a slight
problem to get all her costs covered. Colleges awarded the most talented students, but James Amber
was still the primary provider, and his income was the one that mattered. Married or not, he wouldn’t
let Rachel struggle in that field though, primarily if a law school was in play, but Sera knew her ex-
husband very well and expected his help to be heavy with conditions and demands. Nothing was
free for him, even his daughter’s future.

“Of course. Let me know if you need any help, alright?” She nodded, trying to plant a seed, letting
them know who to call if Rachel’s father would plot some silly blackmail one more time. “James is
not the only parent here, and I have enough savings to send her to Yale and back a few times.”
He had never let her send Rachel a single present, gift her with anything on Christmas, birthdays or any other occasion, scared that the girl would discover the truth about her family. Sera begged him so many times, not even willing to dedicate any of her offerings, but her attempts had always been rejected. The answer was still no, not even a postcard, magic twenty dollars bill, nothing. Deprived of this opportunity, she decided to save some money just in case her daughter would need help in the future. James Amber might not always be as powerful and wealthy as he was currently, and Rachel wouldn’t mind a buck or two, saving her ass in a desperate time.

The blue pirate shifted in her seat and then lit up her smoke, hiding her bafflement. Judging by her reaction, Sera was pretty confident that Rachel picked precisely this university or mentioned something similar.

“Well, I don’t know how she would react, but…” Chloe bit her lip, peering at her with hesitance. “Thanks, I guess?”

“You’re welcome.” Sera lit up her smoke and smiled. “So, since we’re done with this money talk…” Somebody on the other side of the table sighed deeply, evidently very thankful. Ah kids, always stressed when asked about cash. “…How did you convince my daughter to take your last name, huh?” Rachel had to be damn in love with this young woman and Sera, as her mother, had the full right to know why and how it happened. Discussing children’s relationship choices was never easy, and she didn’t want to cross the line, plotting silently how to get to the bottom of this without asking directly. Chloe Price was an open book though, politely delivering even more facts and specifics than were anticipated. The last name question was just an excuse, even if buried between friendly smirks and drags of smoke.

“I didn’t.” The blue pirate shrugged. “It was her idea. She didn’t want to be associated with her dad or something like that.”

Sera released a long cloud of smoke very, very slowly.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah.” The blue rebel scratched her nose, not even noticing the setup. “Everything went to shit when I told her about those shenanigans he was doing to you, but Rachel always wanted to run away from home. She tried a few times before we even met.” One day she should ask Rachel why she had always wanted to elope so badly. The only reason Chloe knew was the wish to travel and have sex as much as they wanted, but she was sensing there was more to it. “Are you fine that… that we’re together? I mean, Rachel and me? Like married… and stuff?” She finally risked asking sensing the right moment.

Sera was still processing the news about her daughter running away though and first only nodded, distracted by the information hidden between the lines. Something terrible had had to happen in the Ambers’ household. Something dark, shady and sinister. When she left Rachel with James, Sera hoped it was for the best, and her own sacrifice would pay off with her daughter’s happiness and the stress-free childhood. She was slowly learning that it didn’t work out. At all.

Chloe was still impatiently waiting for her response. Ah, marriage. Well, what was done, was done. A punk girlfriend saving her daughter from a rich and famous daddy. It sounded almost like a fairy tale. Okay, good for Rachel. Although the forgotten mothers didn’t end well in those kinds of stories.

“Not a lot of people showed their support I assume,” she probed for more, smoking slowly and watching the girl wiggling in front of her. Acceptance was important for this kid, and she wouldn’t mind gifting her with it, not losing an opportunity to learn more.
Rachel had to train her better. Chloe was way too open about all the secrets. It was working fine for Sera’s benefit but might be quite dangerous in the future.

“I mean my parents are fine with it,” the blue pirate assured her quickly. “My mom got worried a bit, but they are cool now. The Ambers are trying too, but you know, they’re not super satisfied or anything. They expected her to do better.” The finger armed with the new tattoo scratched the wooden table. Sera knew this song from her own recital of experience. Parents always think their kids could score better, James’ and her families included. They had warned them both that it would end in a tragedy but gave up confronted with the pregnancy test. The calamity came regardless though, but this relationship wasn’t a mistake. Rachel wasn’t a mistake and would never be.

“I see.” Sera didn’t want to follow in her parents' footsteps and tell the girl how bad it could end; how hazardous it was to get married so quickly. She also suspected James had given them an extensive lecture on this subject already and she wasn’t keen on recapping it. Plus, she strangely believed it could work, since they survived despite all the circumstances. “Well, Chloe, I’m more than fine you got together. I suspected she had a thing for you back then and was quite surprised that Bowers had been pretty quiet about you two.” He really should check what the term ‘gal pal’ meant, redefine some of his vocabulary. Feeding her with bullshit for all those years, fucking pig. “I didn’t expect it to play it so well so fast though, but if my daughter is happy if you’re making her happy, I’m gonna support you both.” She touched Chloe’s hands, and this time the girl didn’t jump, listening carefully. “You took care of her when she needed you the most. I can trust you. She can trust you. There is nothing more any parent can ask for.”

The blue pirate blushed. It was goddamn cute.

“Thank you. It means a lot.”

The woman who reminded her so much of her wife smirked but didn’t let go of her hand. Her fingers grasped on Chloe’s palm strongly, this time not in a friendly way. It was a warning. A distressed plea.

“Just be careful.” Her eyes grew darker. “Don’t let her fall apart or run down the spiral again. The temptation will always be there. Always. Her whole life.”

“I know.” The drugs weren’t mentioned much, but it had to be on Sera’s mind the whole time, understandably though. Rachel had almost blindly traveled down the same path as her mother, losing herself to the vice and bad company. “I’m aware. We keep it under control, really. No drugs, not even weed, no crazy shit.” They really stopped partying. “She… She can be pretty stubborn and very persistent, but it’s working pretty well. And fuck, but sometimes, when she gets angry, you have no idea how crazy the things can be.” Chloe smiled softly and lowered her head thinking of what she could say about her girl, how to define her passion and fire, mixed with kindness and an outstanding wit. Hard task, but her mom would like to know, right? Bowers didn’t tell her shit. “Rachel is… there are literally no words to describe her. Dedicated, talented, sweet, caring. She is the most amazing person I know. She did a lot of crappy things, but she changed, like really. She is really trying every day. We’re both trying.”

Sera got silent, thinking about how much she didn’t know still, how her daughter was still a mystery, an unknown stranger. It felt shallow to investigate Rachel’s situation if she didn’t know what kind of person the girl really was. Chloe’s words were supposed to be consoling but had an exactly opposite effect. Sera got jealous of all those years she stayed away, all those moments she had missed, everything she had surrendered in the name of the imaginary greater good. Rachel was an adult now, didn’t need her much or at all, and those tricky questions, shenanigans, and trickeries wouldn’t change the fact that it was way too late. Like 19 years overdue.
“You really do love her,” Sera stated looking at the wedding band. No questions were needed.

“I do.”

When Chloe accepted the invitation and agreed to meet her, she wasn’t sure herself what really affected this decision. The guilt was a primary drive, this itchy feeling of betraying Sera’s trust and not following her advice years ago, but the blue rebel didn’t worry about this part that much since her wife was fine with the outcome. Yeah, she fucked up but couldn’t imagine doing anything differently. Checking the waters for Rachel in case she would decide to meet Sera finally was yet another factor, to probe this woman’s intentions and learn more about her attitude, although Chloe was as terrible a spy as a liar, quickly coming to the conclusion that her girl’s bio mom was cool, not discovering much more. Well, Sera wanted to help, that was a groundbreaker, but it was easy to shrug it off since no aid was needed. The real reason the blue pirate dragged her ass to this fancy restaurant she had avoided her whole life was the hope for acceptance. She really wanted to prove herself somehow, show, even if only by words, that Rachel was safe, taken care of and would never be left alone. She was loved.

The more they were sitting and chatting, just like two friends but not family members yet, the more Chloe found herself liking and trusting Rachel’s mother. It wasn’t only about the fact that this woman was chill, and God knew why she even wedded James Amber, but Sera reminded her of Rachel a lot. Same smile, same witty responses, same way of smoking cig after cig and sipping on her coffee in a familiar manner. Chloe couldn’t help but wonder if her girl would become an exact copy of her mother twenty years from now. Not possible, but even a spike of this though made the blue pirate damn uncomfortable as she lurked into the future knowing what was coming.

“Well…” Sera finally spoke. “I’m not really good with formal blessings but welcome to the family. A little bit dysfunctional and wild sometimes though but now your family too. And now go graduate, get to the college, buy that house, but don’t really hurry with the kids.”

They both chuckled, knowing that kids weren’t a direct threat or would require careful strategizing. Mentioning offspring was just a distraction though. It was nice to finish this meeting on this note, even if not all of Sera’s questions met their answers. However, she had so many that the whole night wouldn’t be enough. Whole life.

That was it. They had to go, and it got damn, fucking cold.

“Thanks.” The blue eyes got brighter when Chloe got up. “I will try to talk to Rachel about meeting you. I can’t promise anything, but I will try.” She really meant it. Her girl might still refuse though. Like mentioned before, Rachel could be hella stubborn.

“Smart cookie after all.” Sera didn’t plan to leave yet. The cold breeze was refreshing, and she had a thing or two to think about anyway. The waitress would have to survive serving her with beer and coffee for most of the evening. “Chloe?”

The blue rebel stopped, zipping up her jacket. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. Thank you for being there for her when I couldn’t.”

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Mr. Keaton was in despair, anguished and close to a panic attack. Juliet Watson decided to drop from her role, excusing herself with emotional problems and colossal distress. All the artists had issues and traumas, it was part of their profession, a reason for how they become magnificent and could continue to develop their craft and talents. He secretly suspected that the girl found the text arduous to learn and wasn’t keen on spending her freshman year in college memorizing long passages and monologues. His magnum opus for Blackwell Academy, the final and incredible production, which everybody would remember and talk about for years, was in danger though. Saving the play would require a unique turn of events, the right person in the right place, indeed a miracle.

And then, the miracle happened.

Rachel Price entered the drama lab with her head up and hazel eyes filled with hope, asking for a role, and she got it, just after the first reading. Not all of her colleagues were pleased with such a rapid comeback, expecting her to work way harder to recover her status as a theater star, but no one could compete with her skills and experience. She won their hearts again though, except for Victoria Chase, who not surprisingly was creating problems and demanding changes during every rehearsal. The girls were rivals for years, and that didn’t change. This time they were about to confront each other in Shakespearian words as well. It was truly magical to observe their brawl on stage, as it was adding more suspense and tension to the already engaging plot.

Beneficial, magnificent, fantastic. Mr. Keaton was extremely pleased.

Rachel was way less pleased, keeping up with appearances and not confronting the fashion snake directly. Victoria was getting enough shit on stage, being humiliated every time she was caught on a mistake or forgetting the line. The girl was so distracted lately, losing her wit and endurance. Maybe it was for the better, so Rachel left her alone, even if taking advantage of the situation was tempting.

It was a hardship to fit the drama club meetings in her busy schedule, forcing her to travel back and forth between the dorms, the house, the school and all the other places. She really wanted to be busy though, saving her free time for her blue rebel and surrendering to a different kind of distraction while in Chloe’s arms. Even if her calendar was full and the daily plan packed, Rachel was way more relaxed and composed than usual, not tormenting herself with overthinking about some issues and past events still hurtful. Being busy was good. It smelled like the future.

She would have to memorize some of her lines today though. This play wasn’t going that smoothly, and Rachel was still a bit rusty, getting used to the stage again.

“Booyaa!” She almost got a heart attack when Chloe scared the shit out of her, surprising her by the locker. The rebel’s classes ended a few hours ago, and she was not expected to be at school at all at this hour. Rachel hated surprises, with one single exception.

This exception got poked in the chest and grinned.

“Hi there, you pirate,” she hugged her, damn happy. It felt so good to see her. “Baby, you’re freezing. Where have you been? Fuck, you’re gonna get sick.” Chloe smirked when held closely, enjoying the attempts to make her warmer. The ocean breeze was indeed chilly. “Did you enjoy your lunch?”

“I did.” She answered following Rachel through the Blackwell hallway. Somebody gave them a dirty look, as always when they were together. Those stupid kids should get over the fact that some couples get married. Not a big deal. “I did,” Chloe repeated. “Along with the company.”

Rachel slowed down, then stopped, tucking her hair behind the right ear. Her girl meeting Sera was somehow troubling, but she didn’t oppose the idea, knowing that her mother wouldn’t stop until
someone would finally face her. Chloe, done with the text messages exchange and other stupid misfits, finally gave up, asking for Rachel’s permission. Her wish was granted, and the encounter took place today, just after the classes. It was hard not to think about it though, even with Shakespeare and Victoria involved.

“How was it?” She asked quietly, trying to hide how curious she was.

“Short.” Chloe shrugged. “Decent. She asked about you and offered her help if needed. She wants to meet you still, but no pressure. And…” The blue pirate smirked and kissed her forehead. “She’s hella ok with the fact that you’re married.”

Of course, she was ok. She didn’t have much choice, especially trying to win Chloe over. Rachel didn’t know much about her biological mother, but it was logical, entirely predictable. The first rule of manipulation stated that you had to be accepting of every crazy idea before forcing your own will. Clever. She didn’t share her concerns though since her rebel was damn happy with the outcome.

“What about Bowers?” Rachel asked, starting to walk again, holding the blue hand and enjoying Chloe’s presence. Then, the flash of memory blinded her for a second. Sera aiming at Frank, her own gun behind the belt. It seemed like a cheap action movie, not a real event. Not like her life.

Shakespeare’s play looked like a documentary in comparison.

“She didn’t say much, but I guess the case is closed,” Chloe stated carefully, not sure what to answer. Sera didn’t share much, and she didn’t ask. The whole idea of Rachel deciding about Frank’s fate was way too bizarre to mention. “He won’t get into our shit anymore. Are you gonna meet her?”

“I don’t know yet.”

A blue hand on her shoulder stopped her in place again, and forced to turn, looking into Chloe’s eyes. Rachel scoffed not willing to go through another pressured talk now, since she didn’t make any decision. Actually, it was a lie. She was changing her mind every other hour, sometimes ready to set up a meeting, sometimes trying to forget about Sera’s existence. If Chloe wanted to press her more it would end quite badly.

“If you decide not to meet her, it’s really ok, Rach.” The blue pirate surprised her one more time. Rachel smiled. “I will support whatever you decide, alright? And speaking of support…” Chloe snorted and straightened up apparently very pleased with herself “I would like to officially inform you that I applied today. Ms. Grant almost flipped a shit. You should’ve seen her face.”

The poor teacher almost fainted hearing about Chloe’s plans and seeing the application prepared, forgot how to breathe for a good minute. With that ability, Ms. Grant could join The Otters and dedicate her life to a career in swimming. It would probably be more foreseen than her unruly, problematic student willing to study at MIT.

“Damn, Price.” Rachel laughed and hugged her closer, so damn fucking proud. She tangled the blue hair, secretly planning some special celebration. Six months ago, Chloe was a high school dropout, a lost cause, a failure. Well, look at her now. What a change. “You’re way ahead of me. Now I have to put my papers together and join the rat race. Pick me up after? Around 8 pm?”

“Sure.” Chloe nodded and, seeing her girl leaving, frowned in displease. “Hey, Rach. Didn’t you forget something?”

The blond angel stopped and turned around swiftly.
“Oh. My deepest apologies. Come here.” She murmured dragging her closer for a long, well-deserved kiss. It was truly inexcusable that Rachel wanted to leave without a proper goodbye. Chloe almost pushed her against the wall in favor, knowing her girl wouldn’t mind though, even if the whole school was watching. Yesterday had left her hungry for more. “Uh. That was something. You want the whole Blackwell to explode?” Rachel broke off, pretty sure about her plans for the evening. Shakespeare could wait, Chloe couldn’t. Funny, how one blindfold could change some reactions and make the future MIT students lost their minds in the middle of Blackwell High.

How everything could change.

“That’s the pirate thing.” Chloe snuck out from her arms, kissed her nose and rushed to the exit. “See you at 8!” She yelled, turning around one more time before opening the main door.

“Beast!” Rachel yelled back, shaking her head and smoothing out her shirt slowly. Kissing this pirate was the most fantastic experience ever, but almost always messy. It was hard to let her go, though. Always so damn hard.

Trusting that she still looked decent, Rachel started to walk faster hoping to meet one more person before heading home. It was almost seven, most people already went back home, leaving the hallways empty. This encounter couldn’t wait though, she needed an insight. Chloe, drama club, even Victoria, were all excellent distractions, but Bowers with Sera were still on her plate and sooner or later she had to decide what to do with her meal. Touching it would equal consuming, refusing to eat would be goddamn rude. She passed Nathan, who was rushing as well, almost running and not even sending her a single look. His civil war with Victoria had to be stressful and she almost felt sorry for the guy. Yeah, he was insane, but it was hard to watch him losing his shit over and over. Oh, Chase, what the hell were you doing?

She knocked on the classroom door and cracked it open lightly.

“Hi, Mr. Jefferson Do you have a moment?”
The storm came unexpected, tearing apart the grey stillness of the sky, appearing above the top of high pines, jerking the branches with the sharp swirls of wind. The flash of light hit hard, followed by the growling noise as the first thunder assembled itself, crashing in a rapid suicide just in front of the building. Growl, growl, hit. The cannonade of raindrops came in a blink of an eye later, echoing their rumble over metal rooftops and the pavements’ tiles. A full attack, an aggressive invasion, but even if terrifying at some primal stage, it was reviving and resuscitating.

Victoria liked to look at the bliss of sudden chaos, observing it through the crying window, safely sheltered in the tranquil walls of her own dorm room. There was something mystic in a way how the thunder’s blinding was taking her aback, throwing her out of balance and then slapping her face with a loud and warning sound. So sudden, so wild, so unexpectedly expected. Just like a bunch of robbers, breaking into her parents’ house in the middle of one of August’s nights, invading, raiding, and changing the benign present into one harsh tempest. Yell, one more, her family woken up, mother crying, her proud father begging on his knees for their lives, them laughing, joking, strolling through the corridors and rooms, destroying the common order, replacing and switching to heedless disarray. Everything had seemed so strange, unversed, new in a bad way, distant like it wasn’t her family, her house, there was no month called August. A quick snap and the burglars were gone though, hasty like one of the winter storms, a freak of nature, somehow organic but still unforeseen. The circle of life had turned its gear in the right direction though as they all had gotten caught and locked down in prison, but Victoria’s definitions and priorities had changed forever. Since then she had always been prepared, always ready, looking for the weakest point of the opponents and the safest bunker at a close range.

Thump, said the thunder, spreading its flashy limbs in a strike.

They had planned it, accomplished it and even if failed at the end, while in court they should’ve stood up fulfilled and pleased of themselves, showing their superiority, dominance, and power. Instead, Victoria had seen a bunch of scums and has-beens, apologizing, expressing their weakness and limitation, scared to death by the justice system and ready to do anything to avoid the prison. It made the situation worse, deplorable and awfully bitter, changing her own taste of fear, tangling the chain of thoughts, turning them upside down. Her world had been altered by a group of nobodies; she had lost so much and rapidly transformed because of crying young boys, no one special. It was degrading and shameful. Cheap.

Cheap, agreed the thunder, a little bit closer this time.

The sudden roar of nature couldn’t reach her now, threaten her in any way, making her feel grander in her advantage, with her hands crossed at her chest and head lifted up conceitedly. However, even if sheltered and in control, deep down Victoria Chase felt small and insignificant, facing the furious gale, calculating and predicting her own chance for survival if stripped out of her fake, civilized power and not gifted by a safe haven. One night, just one fucking night had changed her, tarnishing her bubble, awarding her with stingy revenge, a bleak stench of alleged satisfaction. She promised herself it wouldn’t happen again and then, in his outburst of madness, Nathan almost had forced her to go through this again. No weather report, no warnings, just a pure, wild cyclone, tearing her apart, reminding, recalling how did it taste to fail. After weeks of the silent battles, young Prescott finally wanted to apologize, making everything so not significant, make up, move on, signing off from the war. The miserable agenda they had been on for a few weeks was exhausting and leading them nowhere. Smart move, but Victoria didn’t forgive a betrayal so easily. In fact, she had never forgiven anything and didn’t plan to. Forgiving was a sign of weakness, a perilous game of closing your eyes
in the moment of danger hoping that nothing would ever come out from the shadows again. Quite silly. Fucking stupid. He asked for her to be goddamn imprudent. Yet another crying boy in front of a judge, but this time Victoria was in control of a verdict and the punishment. No more bargains in that department though.

No bargains, growled the thunder, hitting twice in a vile playback.

Hate. Victoria hated herself for her own fears, for not being able to overcome her failing, for dropping to her knees just like her father, mighty and powerful man she had admired. Nathan wasn’t just a random robber though, but her friend and close comrade, somebody she had imagined to be by her side for the rest of her life one way or another. It wasn’t love though, but a commitment of a different nature, not precisely defined, as there was no need for definition. Somebody, who was just like her and she could identify with, by sharing the same struggles and ambitions. If Nathan, her brother from another mother, a kindred spirit, could change into her biggest enemy, who would she become?

Become, whispered the thunder from a distance, backing off from Blackwell.

“Didn’t you hear?”

Victoria shook her head, hearing the chatter at the background, taking a step back from the window, still partly baffled by her own recalls. The rain was still drumming on the rails and cars’ roofs, now as foreboding as eruption’s ashes. She almost forgot she wasn’t alone in her room and it wasn’t easy to rapidly switch gears adjusting to a new challenge. Jesus, those girls couldn’t stop talking. Her so-called friends, servants, private guards wanted her attention and demanded it loudly. The privilege of being the leader though. Their queen.

“What?” She snapped, noticing that the storm was almost over.

“She did it!” Taylor repeated with huge excitement, almost exploding from the excess of possessed knowledge. “She really did it!”

“The whole school knows!” Dana echoed her but with way less fervor. She moved nervously on her seat, reckoning that their leader might not find the news as thrilling. Victoria was unpredictable, especially if taken by surprise. Sometimes it was for the better, as The Blackwell queen struck back viciously, startling them how excellent she could play the high school game of collusions. Sometimes, however, she could take it over to them, frustrated and aggravated by learning about the groundbreaking events as the last one. It was always risky.

It took Victoria a moment to absorb what those two were talking about.

“I know that,” she shrugged and sat by her desk, pretending to organize her notes and papers. Looking busy was always helping her to cover the fluster. This issue wasn’t worth discussing, especially not with Dana or Taylor, and she wouldn’t mind changing the topic to something less disquieting. They were waiting though, like two guarding dogs expecting a signal. Victoria sighed. “I don’t really think it’s a big deal, really. Applying doesn’t equal getting in and Amber doesn’t have a clean record.” Calling Rachel by her maiden name was their way to disregard yet another big news. Married to the blue trash, what a joke. “She can walk around wearing her new Harvard hoodie pretending that her admission is already granted, but when they do a background check and look at all the infractions, the bitch will stop smiling.”

Taylor opened her mouth ready to correct her that Rachel Price wasn’t, in fact, wearing any Harvard merchandise, but Dana stopped her at the last moment. The blond slut might not wave her college flag yet, but her smugly grin and loud babble about filling some papers were as much annoying. Six
months ago, she had begged principal Wells to take her back, repeating the senior year and now was trying to show her superiority again. Whore.

“Record?” Dana rose her eyebrow pouting her lips in a sour grimace. “Nothing that rich lawyer daddy can’t fix,” she added damn sure that James Amber was fully responsible for Rachel getting back Blackwell so quickly and obtaining a dorm room at the floor reserved for the college crowd. The fact that the DA’s daughter was indeed an outstanding student with a curriculum rich with electors and additional activities didn’t even bother her for a second. Two things were ruling this word; money and power, and Rachel’s father was armed by both.

“Oh my God!” Taylor almost jumped on her seat, ready for more gossip. “Did you hear that her dad is like totally okay with her marriage and stuff? He wasn’t even angry at this name change thing! I was shocked! I thought he would be livid!”

Victoria rolled her eyes, hearing the topic mentioned again. Two fucking lesbians tied the knot, ditching the school for a couple of days and trying to prove that they actually wanted to be around each other longer than a few months. Shocking, really, especially that everybody knew about them fucking on every single break anyway. Now they could enjoy each other company filling the IRS forms and arguing about the mortgage payments if they ever would be able to avoid anything better than a trailer. Although, it was more than disappointing that the Ambers took the news calmly not starting a tantrum. The whole school held their breaths waiting for a good fight and maybe even some loud argument in the Blackwell halls, but was left empty-handed and quite saddened. James calmly refused to comment on his daughter’s decision but didn’t take any aggressive stance in this matter either. Victoria really hoped that at least Amber’s father would have some class and put this madness to stop, but he apparently wrote Rachel off entirely.

Bummer.

“Wow, right?” Dana nodded, opening a bag of Skittles. Constantly on a diet, she liked to surrender to her guilty pleasures only during serious gossiping sessions. The need to discuss Rachel Price’s life was closely connected to her craving for sweets. “Jesus, if my like friend or something went full dyke and trashed her surname, I would be offended!”

“I’m sure it didn’t go so easily,” said Victoria, finally taking the floor and getting up. The papers fell from her desk, but she quickly collected them before her minions would offer any help in that matter. They both were playing on her nerves lately with their willingness to serve her in every way possible. Even ass kissing had a limit, especially if packed with fake kindness and phony concerns. Dana was going overboard with her insults, and even if they all marked Amber as the enemy of the state, it was just ridiculously disgraceful.

Victoria sighed. A headache already announced its arrival with a quick stab of pain and she wasn’t sure if she should blame the weather or the constant jabber. “They can do whatever they want though. I don’t really care.” She added, starting to stroll around the room, as her temples started to ache more. Stupid rain. “Amber fucked herself over anyway and now people have to call her by this trashy last name. It’s kinda pleasant if you ask me. The bitch drags herself down, without my helping hand. Karma.”

She suspected why they had decided to get married and how the certain notes and photos could play an enormous role in their official commitment. It was partly why Victoria Chase wasn’t keen on discussing this subject, trying to stay away and not sharing a single glimpse of her involvement. Even Rachel dreaming about a high-class academic career wasn’t making her thirsty for a retaliation. Price and Amber suffered enough, maybe more she had assumed and getting more attached to this case
could be dangerous.

“Why did they do it, though? Not like one of them was pregnant or something.” Taylor, obsessed with gossips about relationships didn’t want to give up. Divorces, romances, marriages and supposed pregnancies were her major especially when it came to celebrities. Since no superstars were attending Blackwell, she was focusing on the Prices with a double force.

“Money.” Dana took away her candy bag, getting empty in a rapid pace. There were only a few Skittles left. Taylor was supposed to be on a diet too, what a lying cow. “I don’t know about Rachel, but Price probably wanted to put her hands on the family’s fortune.”

“Chloe, a gold-digger?” Her friend looked at her with an enormous amount of doubt. “Nah, it doesn’t add up.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures. And she’s always been dirt poor. Remember the disgusting hoodie she was wearing as a freshman?” Dana shook her head grabbing the last few candies and filling her mouth with the colorful sweetness. “Jesus, it was terrible. Amber is a different story. Her reputation went down, but she was always loaded.”

Taylor pondered for a moment. The explanation was logical, and according to the scientist magazines such as “People” and “US Weekly,” it wouldn’t be a rare coincidence. Reading about her favorite celebs splitting and being used because their wealth was always making her upset and the news way less exciting. Despite the code of conduct that required to hate Rachel Amber with passion, Taylor couldn’t help but pity the girl. First, the coming out thing, then this. No one deserved that much misery.

“If it’s true then I really feel for Amber now,” She nodded sadly, genuinely upset. “Poor Rachel though. She trusted the wrong person. She is so in love with Chloe.”

“Yeah, well, maybe.” Dana shrugged, not interested in proceeding with this conversation any longer since there were no sweets around. “What about this Harvard thing though?” She looked at their queen which was still circling around them like a hawk on the hunt. “Victoria, you gotta do something! You can, right?”

The blond icon of fashion and great taste stopped in place and narrowed her eyes. Her track of thoughts was broken in half again by the same exasperating plea. Frankly, she didn’t care if Rachel Amber would get in to Harvard or fly to the moon next month as long their paths wouldn’t have to cross very often. Her mind was occupied by a completely different person now, a person who she had never expected to even remember. The copies of Samantha Myers’s school records and medical reports were peacefully laying on the desk, surprisingly not burning the wooden surface with their content. Freshly stolen from principal Wells’s office, the files were read at least a hundred times already, costing her substantial distress and a long, sleepless night. It was huge, it was essential and critical, but she couldn’t say a single word about it, knowing very well those two would jump on Nathan’s throat in a second forgetting about other high school gossips. He would eat them alive though, and even if Dana and Taylor’s safety wasn’t her priority, Victoria didn’t want to start yet another war.

“Of course I can,” she responded, still distracted and sidetracked. Her headache was getting worse. Coffee, rain, and red bull were a deadly combination, precisely when she wanted to focus on something other than her current obsession.

Samantha Myers became her obsession. What a joke.

The rain rustled in a gasp of wind, becoming louder for a second, and then got back to dying. The
front yard became one big puddle, blurring the lines between the outline of the grass lawns and the gravel paths or cement trails. It would be hard to find a way to cross this dark ocean, navigating safely to the main building. The school had gotten renovated last summer, but nobody had thought about creating a covered route from the dorms to the classrooms. In Oregon! At the coast, where rainstorms are more common than the sight of an adequately shaved guy! Brilliant. Wells was an idiot.

“Like how?” She heard Taylor expressing her doubts again. “Victoria doesn’t know people in Harvard and stuff.”

“Oh, trust me, Taylor.” The Blackwell queen snapped. She really didn’t want to make Rachel’s situation harder, but no one was supposed to question her authority. Every revolution started with doubts though. Victoria Chase couldn’t afford another one. “I do know people. If I want I can make Amber’s life a living hell, especially her application process. I have my ways.” Little did they know. If she wanted shit to go down, it would be one phone call, one message and the famous law school wouldn’t be an option for Rachel at all. Not now or never.

She got dizzy, so she leaned over the wall, standing close to the desk, just in case those two would like to lurk in the papers, check her files and notes. It had never happened before, but there was a first time for everything, including a betrayal.

Stupid, fucking betrayal. Nathan. Samantha. How the fuck did she miss it? How could she share the info with anybody not compelling them to question her own judgment? How could she confront Nathan at all if he was so mentally unstable years ago and it had progressed dramatically over time?

“So… Are you gonna do it?” Taylor asked finally, unsure what to think about the sudden silence.


Fuck it.

She quickly scrolled a few months back to a video she had taken in September. Rachel Amber in her prime, drunk, barely standing, then not standing at all, messy and high as hell. Victoria didn’t know much about Harvard’s admission process but was damn sure they would take a double look at her application if somebody would send them an anonymous message, implying that a specific Blackwell student was guilty of more than just a few minor violations and could be possibly a danger to others. Rachel had been indeed arrested for possession of illegal substances with an attempt to sell or distribute at the school campus last year. She had been whoring around with a drug dealer, ditched the school more times than anybody could count and was a legit junkie. Her application to Harvard certainly didn’t describe all of those iniquities, as Rachel portrayed herself as a freaking saint, now married, ambitious and successful. Rich daddy or not, Victoria had hard evidence that Mrs. Price wasn’t worth to even put her foot at the famous school’s parking lot.

On the other hand, why would she fucking care?

“I don’t know yet.” The phone got tossed on the desk. Victoria shrugged and looked outside the window again. The storm had ended, leaving the area a tad flooded and covered in mud. Dirty. “I really don’t know.”

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Chloe almost got hit in the face by the massive, main door to Blackwell Academy as it opened widely, cracking and squeaking in a rapid warning. She almost lost her balance, stumbled holding onto the guardrail at the last minute, and then got pushed again with full force, deprived of a dry shelter under the entrance’s roof. Shaking her wet hair and almost slipping, she jumped back, determined to take a stance and show that wasn’t a way to treat a proud pirate, especially during a wild, raging storm. It could be just an angry accident though, but Chloe Price’s allergy to coincidences was quite legendary.

Especially when it came to him. Especially lately.

“The fuck is your problem?” She yelled, snapping out her freshly lit up cigarette, now sadly stifled by the pouring rain and struck back, ready to rip him to shreds with her bare hands or pure wit. Whatever would hurt him more. The whole school acted weirdly since they came back from Portland and this dickhead obviously wasn’t an exception. Not to mention she was already on edge today, nervous and irritated, and it didn’t take much to get her freaking livid.

Nathan Prescott scoffed, trying to ignore her, but Chloe blocked his way out, not willing to step aside or silently get back to the shadows. The covered space was limited and forced them to face each other though. Perfect storm at the front, school’s hell on the back, skull and bones’ flag in front of him. Nathan Prescott was cornered with no way out.

“Fuck off, dyke.” He snapped but didn’t even touch her, calmly staying in place. Smart move, although starting any kind of wrestle would require both of them getting soaking wet hella quickly. The grey curtain of rain was still thick and dense, postponing any wander or even a speed run to the other building. The blue pirate sniffled, looking around and hoping for a backup or at least lack of witnesses. A few other students huddled in the corner of the entrance, waiting for the tempest to calm down, but didn’t intend to interfere or speak. She recognized some of them. Warren Graham, a few others from the nerdy bunch, a couple of freshmen. Those kids were harmless. Good. Perfect. Well, it could be worse.

Chloe shook her head taking off her wet beanie and smiled with no joy. The name calling, in their faces or behind their back, got pretty popular recently. Since they got married, Blackwell started treating them more or less like the outcasts, as if tying the knot was a disease, the beginning of an epidemic that could contaminate them all with responsibilities, duties, and adulthood in general. According to high school assholes, it was kinda alright to hook up with a girl or even date one but getting so serious was a big no-no. She didn’t give a fuck though, greeting them kindly with her middle finger raised, but Rachel was way less immune, even if playing tough and dealing with the snarky remarks on a daily basis.

And now Sera. Her little sunshine was hella worn-out.

“Oh, aren’t we nice today?” Nathan was always mentally unhinged, always manifestly reckless, but it was time for somebody to teach him a lesson. Tired of bullying and driven up the wall, Chloe was as dangerous as him, if not more. “What’s your deal Prescott, huh? Why can’t you act like a fucking human being?”

“I said fuck off!” He almost hit her but lurched struggling to stay on his feet. She noticed how pale he grew; how much his hands were shaking. Chloe frowned. “I want you to disappear, you get me? The whole world to disappear. Just fucking vanish like the rest of you! Get back to your whore and…”
Blue eyes sparkled.

“What did you say?” Chloe asked, supposedly in a very calm manner but took another step in his direction forcing him to lean over the stone wall. The rest of the students moved quickly to the other side of the terrace, securing the best view and their own safety. The blue pirate really didn’t want to start a fight, trying to keep her record clean and ignore Nathan’s existence, but no one could speak badly about Rachel, young Prescott included.

He tripped over his own foot, then straightened up, still shaking. She stepped in closer, curious, worried and fuming at the same time. Something was seriously wrong with this guy, way worse than usual. Now he was trembling as the last insult was a vast stretch, a final achievement and cost him all his strength and vigor. Pathetic. It seemed important to know what had gotten to him though, but Chloe couldn’t read much from his bloodshot eyes, jerking in a nervous twitch, moving up and down, not able to focus on one point. Was he high? Again? It was pretty depressing to see him falling apart, but she left the sympathy for the rest of the devils, moving even closer. Rachel was out of the market, she had been for a very long time, and the rich prince still dared to hit on her. Nathan wanted to throw a fit about her girl? Very well, Rachel had a protector who wasn’t willing to retract so easily, scared by the Prescotts’ connections and associations. Yeah, Chloe got it, Nathan still had some high hopes, not finally crushed and burned down, but too bad for him. Such sad news, really.

She would give him some more sad news though.

“Leave me alone!” He yelled, seeing her fingers grasping on his jacket. “Help!” The group of scared students looked in an entirely different direction. “Help! Leave me the fuck alone!” Nathan struggled for a moment, trying to free himself, to push her back, but Chloe was holding him firmly. As tightly as she was fucking angry, pretty close to tear off his jacket. “It will happen again. Do you hear me?” She felt drops of his saliva on her face but didn’t care to wipe them off. Closing her eyes, Chloe pushed him harder. Nathan growled. “It will happen again. And this time... This time it will be worse. Final. It will be so final.” Suddenly he weakened in her grasp, drenching in sweat, almost falling to the ground, and the blue pirate found herself supporting him instead of threatening. “I can’t. I’m not ready. I’m not…"

Chloe blinked and let him go, raising his hands, forgetting of any kind of retaliation. It was humiliating is some way, as he almost dropped to his knees but desperately grasped onto the fence’s metal teeth saving the remains of his dignity. Not much was left at this point.

“You need like serious help, man,” she murmured. “Like fucking now.”

“Please…” Nathan sobbed, wrapping himself in his jacket like a little boy comforting himself with a favorite blanket. “Please… Don’t be real. Anything can’t be real...”

She looked at the rest of the students, who stopped pretending they weren’t interested in the brawl nor occupied by something else, but no one was willing to help or even interact. Graham was the only one who actually opened his mouth to say something, but no sound left his lips. Fucking assholes. It was between them though, no one wanted to cross paths with Nathan or the blue pirate.

“Prescott, calm down,” said Chloe after a good few minutes of awkward silence, broken only by the sobs and quiet weeping. “Do you want me to take you somewhere? Like a counselor? Or a doctor?” Asshole or not, she couldn’t leave him like that, it would be disgraceful. Dragging out her phone, the blue rebel was thinking about who to call and ask for an intervention. Well, not Rachel. Not, Max. Maybe Jefferson. They were buddies, right?

“No…” He stopped her hand already tapping the number to the principal’s office. “No, I’m good. I’m really good. I’m sorry for what I said about Rachel, you know? She is very special, like
important. We know. I know. She is not like the others. I… I’m really sorry. I’ve never wanted to be an asshole. It’s not me, it’s not the real me, you know?"

The blue rebel watched him for a moment, still with her mobile in hand, confused as hell by the sudden mood swing. Like everybody else, she had heard a decent amount of gossips about his family life or lack of any, weird obsession with dark shit and photography, and had seen in person a few outbursts of rage. No one knew how to help this poor bastard, and regardless of all his school’s code violations and weird behavior, Nathan Prescott didn’t get a single detention. No therapy, no doctors, as he was just medicating himself, partying hard and keeping his status, able to get away with everything, murder included. A rich daddy could be a curse sometimes, almost as bad as a dead one.

“Sure, dude. Just…” The phone landed back in her pocket. Chloe rubbed her neck still puzzled. “Watch your mouth next time, alright?”

He looked at her in shock, apparently forgetting how he had called Rachel, and then burst out forward, passed her quickly, running down the steps as jumpy as a freaking squirrel. He got wet in seconds, as the rain was still heartlessly pouring, but somehow it made Nathan Prescott smile.

“Gotta go.” He yelled back and started walking fast, hands in his pockets, not bothered by the natural shower. Turning around he sent her a wide, crazy grin, with perfectly white teeth exposed and then winked quickly, as if this encounter was just a play, a scripted scenario. Chloe could swear he was whistling something, like a classical song or some shit.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” she watched him disappearing, entirely baffled and confused by her own reaction. The students were as surprised as her, looking at each other wide eyed. She could sense new gossip being born, as they probably imagined this scene to be part of a bigger drama, act four or five of a large theater play. In fact, Chloe and Nathan had never been friends nor enemies, always avoiding each other more or less naturally. He was the CEO of the Vortex club, she was the infamous punk trash. The only thing they had in common was attending the same school. And Rachel.

Rachel. Chloe looked at her phone again and cursed. It was about time to go check on her and see how it was going. She considered calling but didn’t want to interrupt her meeting. It was like what? Two hours now? Sighing, she lurked at the dark and grey sky, counting her chances to get to the truck more or less dry. The storm should pass already, it was almost over. One more smoke and she should be fine. They said cigarettes could kill, but also could save her punk ass from getting pneumonia. Take that, health warnings!

She lit up, still thinking about the poor bastard. Nathan. Damn. Whatever Jefferson was telling him wasn’t really working but as far as she was concerned, they could even play chess every morning calling it therapy. Prescott’s mental state wasn’t her business at all and Chloe would really prefer to keep it that way. Getting involved could be dangerous too. The blue pirate shrugged, taking a long drag of smoke and really hoping that young Prescott would stay the fuck away from Rachel. As far away as Arcadia Bay would let him.

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The ground was smelling like rain and pine, mixed with mud, wild berries and the million steps of other travelers who had enjoyed the hike before them. It wasn’t easy to stroll through the piles of rocks, high weeds and massive roots protruding and debarring the road, but they managed without
complaint, even if the steady journey was stopped a few times by a rapid gust of wind or an explosion of raindrops. The crowns of thorns and leaves were covering them smoothly, participating gladly in their reunion, closing them in a green, rich shell of nature.

They had been walking for a while now, picking random paths, not perturbed to set a direction, just enjoying each other’s company or at least trying to. Even if the trails were chosen blindly, they both subconsciously were moving up, avoiding any road that could lead them back to the bay shore. Striving to for the panoramic view, for a different perspective, both knew where they were going although the end wasn’t as important as the expedition itself, so far quite silent.

“Thank you for meeting me,” Sera said calmly, hiding her hesitance and still not recognizing that this young woman with her hands in her pockets and long golden mane covering her face was her daughter. They didn’t speak much, mostly sharing some useless comments about the weather and communicating through gestures more than words. Hi, how are you, great, how do you do, and off they went, but it was time to speak out, not watch her in awe.

Rachel nodded still obscuring herself with a mess of her hair.

“It’s a… yeah.” She mumbled, not sure what to say and baffled by her own reluctance. Hiking was way easier even if her shoes were already covered with forest sludge and a little bit wet inside. No grumbles or whines though, she wanted to keep walking.

Sera followed her, keeping her distance. Five feet, sometimes ten depending on the terrain, as she was probing their endurance, testing the waters of how close she would be allowed to be. A trailblazer was a precarious vocation and becoming one could end up with all the bridges burnt, and no route outlined. She had no experience in such an expedition.

“How is school?” She tried again, playing it safe. “And everything?”

Her daughter smirked.

“Good. Pretty well, actually.” Asking about Blackwell felt so abnormal, just as if Sera was entitled to this question. She wasn’t by any means, but on the other hand, they had to start somewhere. “Along with everything. How is...” Rachel stuttered. “Whatever you do for a living?”

It sounded way more suspicious that she intended, especially with her eyebrow raised and lack of smile or any friendly gesture. She had the full right to suspect that her mother wouldn’t like to share anything about her profession though. No one with a decent job would be involved or associated with drug dealers, carrying a gun for their own protection. On the other hand, a straight-A student had been stashing a revolver behind her belt as well. Desperate times called for desperate measures and cold bullets, thankfully never shot.

“I have my own business.” The answer came regardless. Her mother couldn’t risk keeping many secrets or used her candor as leverage. “Nothing too fancy, but I get a decent profit from it.”

“A business? Import, export?”

Sera bowed her head, noticing that Rachel just quoted Bowers. That was how he described their connections during their last brawl, but honestly Frank didn’t know much more than necessary. The discussion about him and his so-called future were on today’s agenda regardless, almost set in stone despite Chloe’s doubts and requests to leave this topic untouched. Rachel, aware of the issue, apparently possessed the secret knowledge of how to navigate the discussion in the way she wanted without being so unashamedly obvious. Blood was thicker than water. Good.
“Pretty much.” She sighed, wondering if Rachel would ask more or how her curiosity would be voiced. “I invested in a certain industry, and it pays me back nicely. I don’t have to worry about money anymore, so I’m able to help others.” It was an evident hint that financial aid was within reach, but her daughter just shrugged, not even considering this option. Born and raised in a wealthy family, she couldn’t care less about money, especially from such an unreliable, enigmatic source. She had to say goodbye to her golden credit card but was still receiving a pretty nice paycheck every month, way bigger and fatter than Joyce Madsen’s usual income. James didn’t stop supporting her in that matter, despite Rachel’s fears that marriage would empty her bank account or force her to close it. One decent thing he had done. She didn’t need more cash. Not from her. Not now.

The fact that her father’s sources could be way shadier than Sera’s didn’t even cross Rachel’s mind.

“Good for you.” She replied, avoiding another slippery part of the path. “Is it legal?”

“Perfectly legal.” Prepared for this question, Sera didn’t even blink nor show how hurtful the inquiry was. “When I got clean, I met a man who helped me financially to the point that I could establish my own business.” Well, kind of. Richard was older than her and damn loaded, interested more in a relationship than material support. Aware of how to play this game, she started the affair with a purpose in mind though, enjoying his affection and gaining as many resources as she could. They had spent a few years together, and even if he wasn’t aware that there wasn’t love on her part, the commitment was beneficial for both. Clear trade. He wasn’t a bad guy though, on the contrary.

Richard was the first person in her life who encouraged her to fight for Rachel, to finally see her and the one who helped her get up emotionally after the failure. They had fallen apart several months after when he met somebody way younger and more dedicated. Sera had taken his money along with the address book and started anew, to his great irritation. Her daughter didn’t have to know all the details though. “It might sound way more sinister than it is, but I own a cannabis supplying company and, as you know, it’s authorized in the state of California. Legal.” Sera pointed out. “It will be legal here too soon enough as well. That was my business with Frank if you wanted to ask.”

Rachel shook her head and reached for a smoke, partly challenging her mother and interested in her reaction. If Sera would like to give her a motherly lecture about tobacco use, their meeting would end faster than planned. Way faster. Mentioning Frank and drugs required either a snap or a dive into a grey inhale. She preferred the latter.

“My mother sells weed.” Zippo clicked. “Ironic. So, you assumed he would go legal?” It made way more sense that she expected. What kind of job could a former drug addict could hold anyway? This, jail or some weird shit. At least Sera was clean. Deep down inside Rachel wanted her mother to be a criminal, a scumbag involved with gangs, the mob and God knows what else. It would be easier to avoid her, blame her, reject her entirely, excusing them both from this weird relation. She couldn’t imagine Frank transforming into a lawful and productive citizen though. He would screw it up anyway. Poor asshole was doomed to fail.

Not like this concept was a bad idea or anything.

“He will have to go legal, or change the state, or the industry since Oregon is going green next year.” Sera lit up too. Rachel waited in place but didn’t offer her own fire. It was too soon for such an intimate gesture. “Or he could stick to heavy stuff, that I don’t touch or support at all.” Her mother breathed out loudly and then narrowed her eyes. “What was he feeding you with?”

The blond, lost angel exhaled nonchalantly, raising her head and closing her eyes. Not minding sharing the particulars but never asked for those, she had to think for a while recalling what had Rachel Amber been using to live her life to the fullest. The whole kaleidoscope of misfits and stumbles, a medley of trips and emotions, artificial and amazing at the same time.
Her feet almost got stuck in mud.

“Speed mostly. Crack a few times, party candies, prescriptions, a few sniffs here and there. I was wise enough to stay away from meth but a few more months and I would’ve jumped into it as well. He’s running a high school cafeteria, didn’t have anything crazy or expensive.” Mentioning one single shot of heroin wasn’t necessary and her mother would flip the fuck out. Rachel noticed how easy it was to talk to her about this stuff as she had never had an opportunity to dwell on it, always concerned about the possible judgment or causing more damage. For Chloe it was just dope, her friends didn’t know much about it, for the family the term ‘drugs’ was scary enough to leave them with their mouths open in shock and disbelief. More details could be risky, so she kept them to herself not willing to elaborate. However, Sera really wanted to know and was pretty familiar with all the terms and side effects, listening carefully and nodding. It was kinda a relief? Uncomfortable as fuck to list all the shit she had been taking, but also cozy in a weird way. Rachel tapped out the ash, slowing down her pace, still not keen on looking at her mother. “So yeah, smart pills most of the time, pretty easy to get hooked up on those. They didn’t make me smarter though, just fucked me over.”

Sera followed her, stepping exactly on the same spots as Rachel. It was safer with the uneven trail, but also damn awkward.

“Are you clean now? No craving?”

Rachel’s fingers trembled once, then again. She started playing with the cig’s filter to calm the nervous twitch scared for a while that it was a panic attack or a flashback of longing. Vortex Club parties weren’t missed much nor the company at those, but the need for a high still hankered. Not severely, of course, the worst hunger was stifled, but in moments of stress or tension, Rachel seriously considered it. One joint, one small fix, nothing too extensive, just to feel like a god again, mighty, invincible and everlasting. Immortal.

“No, not really.” Her lips twisted in an unpleasant grimace. Dishonesty wasn’t necessary though. “Well… Not too often. I got my life back. I’m lying low, no temptations. Chloe…” Saying her girl’s name was subliminal every time Rachel even touched the subject. A smile that followed was also a given. “She helped me tons. She’s still helping.”

Fuck, six months and she was still guilty of this stupid hunger. The blue eyes, the mischievous smile, a touch of her skin, the smell of leather jacket. Her anchor. The girl who everybody assumed was doping as hell was the only reason for her to stay clean. Rachel closed her eyes again wishing that Chloe was here, close enough to hug her. The only company she had was her own mother now, kinda stalking her from behind. Just great.

“I know. I’m so grateful that she was there with you. For you. When the others didn’t.” Sera’s hand almost touched her shoulder, but she retracted, not finding enough courage to cross that line. Not yet. Too soon. Back to five feet away, ten feet maybe. “I heard you want to be a lawyer.”

The break from the subject was celebrated with two lingering clouds of smoke. Simultaneously.

“Well, I have some experience already. At home.” Tapping the ash. “In life.” Tapping even more almost losing the ember. “It would be nice to use it in some way, cash it out. And the law can be fascinating. I really like it, more than I thought.” Rachel didn’t want her mother to be under the impression that James played a vital role in her decision. He had encouraged her of course, and her pre-law program was supposed to impress him, bending to her will way easier than a determined babble about a career on Broadway. The last statement wasn’t a lie though. Rachel really liked the subject of her studies.
“I’ve always assumed you would prefer to be an actress.” Seeing her daughter frowning, Sera sighed hoping her suggestion wouldn’t be taken as sneaky guile. “I saw you on stage years ago. ‘The Tempest’ play?”

Learning that her mother was present during one of the most groundbreaking moments of her life took Rachel’s breath away as her chest tightened in a weird twitch. She didn’t want to show how moved she was, so she just turned away hiding her blush and walked a few steps to the left pretending that something was wrong with one of her bracelets.

Sera was watching her very carefully.

“Oh.” The bands got twisted on Rachel’s wrist twice for good measure. “I got a little bit tired of pretending. I still attend drama club though, it’s fun but not as a profession. Being a lawyer is not that different anyway. There is still a stage, an audience and a performance to nail.” She dared to look straight into Sera’s eyes, trying to produce a smile. “Or I can at least fill insurance papers, right?”

They were watching each other in silence, broken only by the short, rapid rustle of tree leaves. The tension was rising slowly but steadily, to the point that taking a deep breath was a hardship. It was time to break it, cut it in half, but that process could be hazardous for both of them. Hell would break loose, or nothing would happen. Both options were chilling.

“Right…” Sera’s voice was very calm, almost soothing. “Rachel…”

“Yeah?” Her daughter straightened up lifting up her chin ready for a dare. “Just say it.”

It was time.

Sera took a step forward, gracefully avoiding a muddy puddle, then stopped, looked down, nervously licking her lips. Rachel was observing her motionless, with her breath jailed somewhere between an inhale and exhale, in a painful spasm of anticipation. They both knew what would be said, but the knowledge wasn’t making it easier or less petrifying.

“I just want you to know that I’ve never wanted to abandon you.” Her mother couldn’t keep calm any longer. “I’ve never wanted you to feel neglected or forgotten by me. I fought for the right to see you as much as I could. I know you probably have a lot of questions and James…”

Her daughter moved forward yet another foot, so they could almost hold hands if they wanted. The dark pond of water almost cost her a slip, but she managed to keep her balance. Not running away with her gaze was way more challenging.

“I know. I know… mom.” It was hard to call her that, felt like a betrayal. Rachel closed her eyes trying not to think about Rose. Rose Amber was her real mom. Kinda. Uh, it was so complicated. “I’m just… It was such a shock with everything happening so fast. When I learned about you I was already broken, I’d just met her… Chloe, I mean, then the whole shit with Damon…” She didn’t want to talk about the past that much, it happened naturally like a drawing that came to life with a single touch of a brush. A painful painting. “And then after all this, I had to absorb the fact that you just decided to ditch me again…” Her chest got heavy. She shifted her shoulders trying to brush off the annoying weight of inner conflict. “Never met me. Never tried again.” So many sleepless nights, so many weird questions that no one had been aware of, even Chloe. Nightmares so real that left her sore, screaming and drenched in sweat. Rachel shook her head, getting rid of a sudden need to sob. Crying didn’t fit the picture, it was too expensive.

Sera had never wanted anything more in her life than to shorten the distance. One step forward forced Rachel to move as well, avoiding a possible touch or any other kind of contact. She was still
fighting against the inner pressure to break down and melt in the middle of the misty, wet, moist forest in front of a woman who, even if related, was a total stranger. Still.

“The situation…”

“The situation was fucked up, but you didn’t get back to me after.” The hazel eyes burst with flames when Rachel cut her off harshly. “You knew Chloe! You could talk to Chloe, or just ask about me at least! I tried to find you, I tried to force my father to talk and… and…” She pressed her fist to her mouth, trying to stop herself from speaking. Too late. “…And then Frank. Three and half years, Sera!” She wept. Calling her ‘mom’ seemed fucking crazy. “Three and half years of asking myself those questions. Why. Where. How. Like you appearing in my life was a joke, just to fuck me over!”

The dark green fields of wilderness echoed her yell, resonating and repressing it at the same time, creating an intimate, private cage, a personal echo chamber. Sera was listening supposedly unmoved, but it was pure torment to keep herself whole, not falling to pieces or yelling back. The words were harrowing but, in some sense, also bittersweet and hopeful. Rachel wanted to know her, doing everything she could to get a scrap of info, including fucking her mother’s friend, paying a huge price with her drug addiction and then being left empty-handed. Defeated, frustrated and hurt she still agreed to meet. Still. Wanted. To.

“I wanted you to have the father you deserve.” It cost Sera a lot to remain calm, but her voice was shaking. “I wanted you to have a stable home and a future…”

Rachel looked at her with a bitter smirk and then vehemently burst into laughter. Crazy, vicious and very sad laughter, deprived of any joy or amusement. Better this than crying.

“Future? You don’t know shit, Sera. You don’t know shit.” Composing herself was a challenge that she almost failed. Rachel stopped cracking up, but the anger replaced the laugh in the blink of an eye. “He wasn’t a perfect daddy. He kicked me out, humiliated my girl and me, trained me, forced me to… to… do…” No, it couldn’t be said. Too far. She threw her head back trying not to stutter. The words were jailed in her throat, pushed and pulled with all the strength she had left, appearing begrudgingly. Fucking labor. “So many things!” She yelled. “You thought that if he was so groomed and wealthy, he was a better choice? He wasn’t. You bet on the wrong horse and ran away!”

She noticed that they shared the same eye color.

“I had my reasons.” Came the cold response, calculated and designed to calm down the conflict, but Sera being so sedated and defensive almost made Rachel howl. Jesus, she almost acted like Nathan, mentally shattering to splitters and provoked so easily. Mother or not, there was no self-defense, no option for resistance. Fuck, she really wanted Sera to fucking break down, beg on her knees, here and now. Reasons? She had fucking reasons? Well, go figure.

“I had my reasons too!” She hissed. “Don’t sugarcoat it, for fuck’s sake! I had the right to meet you! It was my fucking right!” Pointing at her accusingly cost her the smoke. The poor cig died in the mud, between the murky puddles. “Especially after I learned about you and went whole the nine yards to see you! And you just decided for me! Everybody decided for me! Even… Even Chloe!”

So used to always standing up for her wife, always so protective about her blue treasure, Rachel bit her lip hard, sensing that she went overboard with this accusation. Chloe was the last to be held accountable, but right now she wanted to blame everything and everybody, the whole world if needed. Faults and errors were an anguish that she couldn’t bear, so distributing her misery was the only option, even if messed up, even if fucking unfair.

Thank God it was raining. No forest fire this time.
“She was… a little bit reckless with her choice to tell you everything.” Sera stepped in, this time way more firmly. Seeing her daughter in such a state was the worst punishment for the years of her absence. “Chloe didn’t know my intentions. It didn’t play out exactly as I planned.”

Rachel rubbed her palm, nodding quickly, but the fight wasn’t over. She had obtained the details about their last talk and, to put it mildly, wasn’t super impressed about her mother’s startling requests and wishes. Even now, even if years older, Chloe wouldn’t be able to reckon what Sera had had in mind, always so candid and honest. Then, she had been just a scared little shit, beaten-up and facing a life-threatening situation. Her little, lost and brave pirate facing a decision so heavy with upshots. No, it wasn’t something that Rachel was willing to accept, she moved forward and kept hiking up the trail like nothing had happened.

They would sort it here and now or fucking never.

“She did the right thing. Absolutely fucking right. Asking her to lie was the most ridiculous thing you could’ve ever done. She went through so much shit just to uncover all the nasty secrets and then you wanted her to keep them for herself?” She scoffed and turned around not able to stand Sera near her. “Jokes on you! No one could even predict the consequences, especially her. She just…” The blue eyes filled with sadness and fear when her girl told her. The desperate grasp, a shy, nervous attempt of an uncertain protection. James angry and desperate. Rose gasping in shock. The sanitized white sheets almost ripped off the hospital bed when she cried. Rachel was crying now too, didn’t even notice. “Chloe just loved me, we were just starting… It would destroy us if she had lied and I learned about it later. We were just kids! She was just a kid!” She sobbed, aware of how terrible it was for Chloe to even start talking and then how she had blamed herself for the honesty. “And you forced her to make this choice, throw it in her face. Do you know how hard it was for her? For us?”

It was predictable, pretty freaking evident that she would finally stand there sobbing, hoping for a storm to come and hide the trails of her tears, to cover her up and let her simply vanish. Her shoulders were throbbing in a lancinating rhythm of a serenade composed by short breaths and sharp snuffles. She missed Chloe so much right now, the new and responsible one, her wife and her other half, and the old one, young, shy and awkward that sacrificed so much just because of Sera.

“It was unfortunate.” Her biological mother responded, still a few feet away. Her voice was muffled and hardly hearable, covered by a dense shade of confusion.

Rachel wiped away her tears, nodding. They could agree on this, no problem.

“It was. Very fucking much.” She felt Sera’s hand on her shoulders, felt pulled closer for an attempt of a hug. The gesture got rejected, but not the touch itself. Rachel couldn’t surrender herself so easily though, trying to stay strong for herself and for Chloe. It was stupid, sure, but forgiving her mother without hesitation would be as painful as not forgiving her at all.

Screaming had always been part of letting things off.

“I never wanted to hurt you, or Chloe,” Sera whispered, swallowing her own tears.

The ground smelled like rain, cries and the fair accusations. The bushes swooshed in a shielding manner, but it was a warning of a change, a hasty transformation. Rachel looked at the grey sky, teemed with fuming clouds and sewed by the rumbling thunders. Something nasty was coming, yet another battle, but she was able to take a deep breath thinking that she was done with her private one.

“And you did.” She whispered back, suddenly so serene and calm. “You hurt us both so, so much.”
Steph reached for the phone, squinting her eyes, with her neck still stiff and back pain rising. The rain was always making her sleepy, eating off all her energy, carefully stashed and distributed between the school, homework, and not going crazy. She lurked at the display still not fully awoken. Max. Again. She was calling her for the third time today. It was quite exceptional since the little freckle wasn’t very courageous when it came to confrontations and whatever she wanted to say would become a clash one way or another. Steph wasn’t ready for it though, not now or in the nearest future. Not going crazy was still a priority after all. She rejected the phone call and turned to the other side ready to get back to her nap. Very nice nap, to be honest.

“Knock. Knock.” Said the text message. “Have time to chat?”

Steph frowned not recognizing the number. Max would never choose to message her from a different phone, since being sneaky wasn’t really her style. Maybe, if things between them were still good and communication not broken, she might do something extraordinary like this. The rough times were usually pushing Max to seek the most straightforward solution though. She would rather call her over and over again instead of switching the number. Who could it be then? Some random chick? One of those nerd guys she had met at the convention about a month ago?

“Sure.” She responded, and then a sudden realization almost left her blind. Knock, Knock. Of course. How could she forget? That’s how they had always started their little chitchats. A few years was enough to forget those small details. Oh, Christ. It was happening. It was really true. She got up, still dizzy and sat at the edge of the bed, waiting for another text, begging it to come.

“What’s up?” The phone blinked.

Well, where to start. Steph scratched her cheek. The mobile flashed again, twice this time, delivering a message from somebody she recognized instantly for a change. The DND queen scoffed impatiently, not willing to divide her attention. Her long-awaited nap was already history.

“Hi, Steph.” Max, obviously. With the commas, period and stuff. Always so formal and official but shy between those few letters. “Hi back.” She typed quickly, rushing to switch to the other screen and hoping not to confuse herself with what she would tell to who. It could be freaking rich with consequences.

“Nothing much. School bullshit.” She replied to Kris, trying to be as nonchalant as possible. Was it really her, though? Maybe it was her brother playing with her or some other asshole? “How was Brazil?” She sent another one just to make sure. Knocking could be pretty universal though. It didn’t have to be Kris. It could be a stranger.

“Hot. Busy. Lonely.” The phone beeped three times. “Mostly busy.” Yet again, also damn casual, just as if they had seen each other a few hours ago. Steph reached for her half-empty coffee mug trying to focus. So, it was really her. Really her. Oh, God. “How was Bay?” She gasped reading another message. What a treacherous question. How to describe years without her? How to tell her everything with a few words in such a limited style? Maybe she should just send her a smiley face and call it done. Good luck, Kris, with figuring out what it meant.

The smiley face wasn’t sent though.

“Would you like to meet anytime soon?” Steph’s heart almost jumped out of her chest, but it was Max again. Unfortunately. For crying out loud, it was the worst possible moment. “Why?” She typed
and then felt bad for being so offish. “Do you need anything?” Less distant but cold as an arctic winter. The little freckle, silent for weeks, now wanted to grab a coffee and talk about the past and present? The future for them was getting bleak, Steph stopped hoping.

She noticed Max started typing, but then erased her message, typing again. And again. Dot. Dot. Dot. This little animation that was always driving her crazy. Max Caulfield was typing, well, good for her. Send it already! Uh. Alright, it would take some time, maybe even hours. Steph switched to the other set of messages, ready to reply. “Not hot and not that busy.” Nah, she couldn’t play it so easy for Kris. “And not that lonely.” Swoosh. A stab to the heart was sent and delivered.

“Yeah, I can imagine…” Kris responded at once, then started writing something and it was taking forever. Oh God, what was with those girls and typing? Steph edgily lurked at the other conversation. Max was still putting letters together. Great. She took a sip of cold coffee, craving some delicious strawberry ice cream. It was damn hot in her room. Did they turn the heaters on already?

“I will be at the West Coast for Christmas. Will you be around, or is your dad is planning some crazy trip to Colorado again?”

Steph froze, and the Rocky Mountains state being mentioned wasn’t the main reason. Kris remembered. She still was able to recall all those stupid, small details showing that she had cared, or even still did. Max probably wouldn’t have an idea what this message was referring to, not asking many questions about her family. Steph’s fingertips slipped through the buttons, almost sending a stupid emoticon, but she corrected herself swiftly. Taking a deep breath was a challenge, realizing the offer was genuine and legit, scary. She scratched her arm, getting up. Standing was helping. No, it wasn’t. She sat down again almost knocking down the coffee mug. Drinking the rest of it was a wise decision, just in case the next time she wouldn’t be that lucky.

“I just wanted to see you.” It was Max again. Just like both of them were talking like one, about the same thing, forcing her to make a choice. No choice was included though or necessary. “To talk.” Her freckle added. Was she really her freckle though? “You know.” Another addendum. “About things.” It could mean everything or nothing.

“About us?” Steph responded and panicked for a second, pretty sure she sent it to the wrong person. Kris would laugh her ass off seeing that kind of message, assuming at once that her ex-girlfriend had never stopped thinking about them and, well, it wasn’t true. Max… Max was still very important and very much loved. Steph didn’t feel loved in return though, still hurt, confused and blatantly blaming Chloe. She couldn’t hold the blue pirate responsible for the situation though, but it was hard to mark her as not guilty. The more she had thought about Max and her choices, the less of her own faults she had seen. Steph really tried to do everything right, caring till the very end as promised, but it didn’t help, didn’t fucking work at all, didn’t matter. Chloe was out of reach though, taken, married and crazy in love, but the little freckle could still have some hopes. Little stupid hopes. Who wasn’t guilty of those though? Speaking of, it was time to say something to Kris, she was waiting. The opportunity appeared magically, just like a kindhearted gift from the mystic fates tired of the gay despair and drama, but was it really so lucky? What was she getting herself into?

“No Colorado.” Damn, that wasn’t very descriptive. Her father was famous for his spontaneous trips all around the country. “I’ll be here.” Steph bit her lip not sure if it was too much or not enough. She hesitated for a moment before sending it though, noticing that her teeth almost cut her skin. Too much? Not too much?

Kris started typing. Again. Dot. Dot. Dot. Those waving points were making her dizzy.

think we should talk.” Oh, so it was serious. Either she really wanted to get back together, even if chances for this outcome were super slim, or finish it once and for all. Steph ran fingers through her hair missing her beanie, feeling almost naked without it, exposed and unprotected. Meeting Max would be pretty much needed but then again, wrong time and place, very wrong. She had to know what to do with Kris first, what her famous and first ex was planning. “Can it wait?” Damn, she sounded like a bitch. “I mean we should talk. But maybe not like now.”

“Wanna meet?” The unknown number smiled at her again. Steph closed her eyes. So, she wasn’t imagining things, it wasn’t just a bait. Kris. Meeting Kris. There had been times when she would’ve done everything for such an offer, now it was more complicated than just saying yes. Consequences. A lot of consequences. Possible outcomes. Costs. Opportunities. Hopes.

“I get it. I’m sorry.” It was her freckle again. Immediately Steph felt guilty. It was shameful to leave her hanging without a serious explanation, but for fuck’s sake, Max was always keeping so many secrets and not saying much. The riddle girl, as they called her. The freaking mystery. It was her turn to be a little secretive, although it felt wrong. Dishonest. “Don’t be sorry, Max. Not your fault.” She replied quickly feeling that the damage was already done. Fuck, she would have to fix it somehow, play it right, better in person. “Will call you later, ok?” She promised, knowing that no one would pick up in the next few days. Rejected, Max went into hiding. It would take her forever to leave her shell again, asking for her attention. Well, Steph screwed up one thing, hopefully it wouldn’t go that bad with the other one.

“Depends.” Every single letter took a few seconds to appear on the screen. It was harsh though, way bitterer than she wanted. Damn, she was never good at this. Steph leaned over her pillows deciding to send one more. “Do you have any Christmas gift for me?” A lighthearted joke should help. Should, but didn’t have to.

She held her breath.

“Actually, I do,” said the unknown number. Steph exhaled deeply. “I really do.” The last message was gifted with a smiley face. Somebody really wanted to meet her. Somebody very, very special. Steph smiled back looking at the screen and nodded counting the days till Christmas.

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The roof of the wooden shed was still drumming with the raindrops, securing them carefully from the storm’s wild outburst. It had started a while ago, and both were lucky enough to find this shelter on the trail, prepared for travelers like them, who got lost deep in the mountains and then surprised by the moody weather. The smell of rotten, old timber, first heated up by sunrays, then wetted in gale was overwhelming, reminding Rachel of all the hiking trips with James and the happy days of her childhood. Everything that Sera had missed and being separated from, now so grotesquely fitting. She peered at her, not certain if she should say something, whose turn it was to start speaking and taking responsibility for fixing this shit up. Every sentence seemed like a stretch, a pulled needle in the process of sewing up a big, ugly patchwork.

“I have something for you,” her mother reached in her pocket and handed her a small, carefully packed bundle. “I believe you wanted it back.” Their fingers met for a second when the package was passed. Sera froze for a second. “It’s yours and will always be yours. If you want it…”

Rachel’s eyebrows rose as she stretched on her seat, hesitant of accepting any kind of gift. Free
goods were usually rich with obligations of paying back or at least being nice in return. Tricky thing. She would prefer not to be in any type of debt to Sera, remaining the one who was in charge of the conditions. Since she was holding it, there was no way to avoid it though. Fine. Rachel just hoped it wasn’t cash or anything expensive.

The past and the present collided one more time when she unwrapped the package. Her fingers brushed the blue weaves and knots of strings and the leather, now dirty and worn-out, spoiled by tons of doubts, anger, and blameworthiness. It had been months since she had seen the bracelet last, and now hardly recognized it and wondered how she could’ve worn this thing most of her life. This small, tiny item had cost her so much stress, hassle and dander. This little piece of trash almost got Chloe killed.

“Oh. This… He gave it back?” Rachel started playing with the band slowly, tracing its shape, weighing it in her hand. The more she looked at the blue texture, the more memories were getting back, enchanted in the fabric, scratches and the torn edges. Him and her, the notes, his demands, nights and days of lying. Her girl so shocked and disgusted learning who owned this useless piece of garbage. Rachel sniffed once, then again, struggling with an upcoming breakdown. Her hair covered her vision when she lowered her head grasping on the bracelet, slapped in the face by her own recollections. “I should’ve given it to Chloe when we started dating. I should’ve told her that I gave it to him instead. She should have it, not him, and now…” She tried to smile, confused at whether having it back was a good thing or the opposite. “I should’ve made so many different choices. I messed up so bad… mom.”

Sera hugged her. Finally, after hours of a steep walk between the rocks and muddy streams, after years of wondering how it would be, how it would taste like. They both expected the gesture to be awkward, maybe cold, strange, odd or unfamiliar, but it felt right and perfectly usual, just like comforting her daughter was as natural as breathing.

“Me too. Me too, Rachel,” she whispered, stroking the blond hair, taking care of every muffled sob, understanding more than her daughter could even assume. The girl, the young woman who was screaming out all her pain a while ago, now finally gave up, looking for solace. She embraced her mother back, rejecting all the inner conflicts and questions whether it was too soon, too late or too whatever the fuck. She just needed her mom, as much as her mom needed her.

The impatient pace of rain didn’t slow down a bit when they parted, sharing a few shy smirks and wiping their eyes stealthily, but the tension dropped down, fading and evaporating. It was perfectly fine to show each other their weakness though; no need for an act, or a performance. They lastly wanted something different, a break from the grim tempest, a reconnection. Smile, hug, tender gesture. Mother and daughter being reunited, not two strangers presenting their strength and persistence.

When calming down, smoking was in order, this time with sharing the fire, and exchanging a few annoying scoffs since the lighter had gotten a bit dampy. They didn’t say much, enjoying the quiet revolution, sitting arm by the arm and listening to the rain, surrounded by the green nowhere, although the silence changed its flavor. It felt good, right, normal, but defining the new order wasn’t necessary. Rachel, slowly relaxing, finally grinned widely, still a little bit wary, and put the bracelet into her pocket, deliberating if she would ever wear it on her wrist again. Its connection to Sera was slowly becoming less troubling, but Chloe could react badly. Not to mention Frank was wearing it.

Jesus, what had she been thinking.

The smile got washed out again. When Bowers had asked for it, she hadn’t had much of a choice though, avoiding the sexual favors, but still, maybe there was a different way out, an alternate
solution. Rachel choked thinking of how much it didn’t matter then and yet how it mattered so much. Stupid, fucking bracelet.

“So, what do you want to do with Bowers?” Sera was either reading her mind or planned the question just after gifting her back with the blue band. It was better to touch the subject now, unwrap another package with similar content or connect the pleasant with the nasty offering. A slap and a hug, or maybe two hugs, who knew where it would lead them.

Rachel blinked.

“Excuse me?”

Her palm got closed between Sera’s hands as her mother looked at her carefully, showing that her interference with their latest fight with Bowers wasn’t just a mishap. James Amber could ignore the drug dealer’s existence, but she would never let this asshole run freely after she learned about his wrongdoings. Sera wanted Rachel to know it was done, or it would be soon enough, and her daughter would be the one to set up the direction.

She was in charge. She was in control. Just as she should be.

“There is at least one thing I can fix or clean up so to speak. I won’t let this dickhead be a problem anymore. I promised Chloe I would let you decide though.” Rachel took a deep breath hearing her girl mentioned. Sera paused for a second hoping she wasn’t crossing yet another line. “She was quite reluctant to even give you this choice, trying to protect you from bad memories but it would be unfair to make this decision for you.”

Decision. It was hard to imagine that Rachel could make any choice in that matter, haunted by everything that had occurred and what didn’t happen. There were no black and white upshots as all the errors where shared and she still had problems to define the dividing line between her own missteps and his mistakes. Booze. Drugs. Her coming back to him every time. Photos and dirty, rapid sex, cheating. Conflicted by still feeling sorry for this asshole, fairly because she was taking part in his calamity for such a long time, Rachel rubbed her eyes wondering how she would be able to gift him with more misery. Her not being with him was a punishment already.

“What are my options?” She asked simply.

Sera’s hands were warm, got even warmer when she squeezed her palm. Prior to this discussion, they hadn’t said a word about Bowers, but Rachel felt her mother knew how torn she was and somehow felt the same. Two women hurt by the same guy, plotting a revenge. Cheap but reassuring. Fusing. Bonding.

Real.

“He would disappear. Permanently or temporarily. From your life. From this town. Forever.” The statement was firm leaving no place for discussion. Sera’s tone was cold, freezing just like the rain outside since she couldn’t afford to drown in sentiments. “Of course, I could just leave him alone, washing off my hands and calling it done but I wouldn’t trust his promises that he would stay away. Not this time.” She shook her head not willing to even discuss changing her mind. Her daughter could make a choice, but the range of the options was limited. “And Bowers has to pay.”

“Permanently?” Rachel’s fingernails marked her hand in a short, sharp spasm. “You mean...”

Her mother didn’t let her finish cutting her off with one smooth gesture. Saying those things aloud would be goddamn risky. It was better for Rachel not to be aware of the ultimate result, but the girl
was way too clever not to read between the lines, looking at her in shock. Well, Bowers’ fee was high, he had worked very hard for such a strict sentence. Sera would never go that far in any other case, but this time her daughter was hurt, wounded and marked for life and she was partly responsible for it. Forgiving Frank on her own behalf wouldn’t be impossible, even if very difficult, but no one would stop a dedicated mother. Especially a parent deprived of being part of her child’s existence for so long and who had put their trust in evil, wicked people.

Even if clean and a productive citizen now, she still could do it, pulling the strings in the right direction but not getting her own hands dirty. Not being criminal, she had known a lot of bad boys who would willingly give Bowers hell, one way or another. Hell, the fucking scumbag deserved it. To be honest, Sera wanted him dead, she needed him to suffer. Of course, granting Rachel the choice was somewhat necessary but also a goddamn nightmare that she was perfectly aware of. Yes, it was a test, how far her daughter would go, but she had learned enough about the young girl already. Sera Gearhardt felt that showing she had her daughter back, in life and in death was essential, and wouldn’t back off if asked for the latter.

“Bad things can happen to bad people.” She stated. “Some of them are permanent.”

Rachel wrestled her hand away. Murder. They were talking about a murder. For fuck’s sake. It wasn’t exactly what she had in mind hoping one day her dreams would come true. A ditch, a shallow grave could be a gracious contribution for those who seek revenge above all else, but she wasn’t that relentless. Yeah, there were days and nights she wished him to die, even hoping to kill him with her bare hands, resurrect and then slay again. Sure, she wanted him gone as eternally as it could be, but Rachel knew that taking even a single slip of responsibility would make her hate herself even more. She was done with hatred. Recovering from it would be more agonizing than being hurt by him again.

“I don’t want anybody hurt in my name.” It sounded nobler than intended. Her reaction was sharp, almost violent, but then she calmed down instantly, stiff and paralyzed. It was scary. Well, also neat that somebody wanted to do such a thing for her, but terrifying.

Chloe had pushed almost as hard.

Realizing that her mother was indeed a very dangerous person didn’t do Rachel any good. She moved away a little bit, frightened about what would happen to her own father if Sera knew the truth. Was it a play or a game though? Was she fucking serious with this killing thing? Holy shit.

“It’s in my name, not yours.” A familiar flame flashed in her mother’s eyes. She wasn’t joking though, on the contrary. “I asked him to take care of you. He did something completely opposite and fed me with the bullshit that you were just fine. Nothing about Chloe, nothing about drugs, James as a perfect father and school going just great. If I hadn’t visited him that day, if I wasn’t in his fucking trailer overhearing your conversation, I would still believe in his lies. Lies!” She hissed snapping out her smoke and letting it get slain by the storm outside. “Years of lying! I ain’t gonna let this stuff go so easily. He betrayed my trust. He promised me he would take care of you!” Her own anger was taking over. Sera needed a moment to cool down, getting up and then sitting back, as Rachel’s presence was fueling her fury more. For years she had been assured that she was the one calling the shots and discovering the tables had turned in such a horrid way left her livid and helpless. Sera hated being helpless, having an enormous personal experience in that field.

Trust was a funny thing indeed, and her all bets in this field were erroneous.

Her daughter was observing her, still scared and baffled by the explosion but also glad to see the real person behind the studied act and supposed concord. The patience wasn’t fake, but Sera reached her limit now showing how angered and furious she really was. Human. She was finally human, not
cold and composed, radically rational when proposing a manslaughter, but as emotional as her child, whom now was learning more about her parent in a chaotic, incensed way. Fucking finally. It took them like forever. The desperation was a common ground though and instead of pushing them apart, tied them together more.

“Oh, he did take care of me.” Rachel sneered, fired up by her own recalls more than Sera’s outburst. “With his dick and his stash. I got a permanent discount on both.” She laughed shortly but then choked quietly aware that it was a completely unnecessary slap to her mother’s face. Not to mention she really didn’t want to see Bowers dead. Much. “Where is he now?”

“Far away and close enough for me to deal with it.” Tied and cuffed in a motel room, fed once per day and guarded by one of the people who Frank probably called a friend a long time ago. Sera couldn’t let him walk around, absolutely certain he would flee faster than the light of thunder. Speaking of, the storm finally finished its piss and they could resume their hike if Rachel wanted. “Don’t worry about him. He appeared in your life because of me, and he will disappear because of the same reason.”

Trying to walk in Sera’s shoes wasn’t that hard. Rachel enjoyed another long drag of smoke pondering for a moment and noticing how hard it was to follow one sound in a storm of thousands. One big fucking mess, slowly dying.

“Sounds fair,” she sighed. “He saved your life though.” Pointing it out seemed pretty critical though. It could save somebody’s life, even if the existence wasn’t worth much.

Sera couldn’t care less.

“So? Trust me, he would be in way more trouble if he hadn’t gotten rid of Damon. It doesn’t justify whatever he did to you though.” The angry spark appeared again, and her daughter could swear that if any glass objects were around they would be broken in a second, crashed against the wall or thrown outside just like Sera’s smoke. Blood was indeed thicker than water. “It wasn’t a trade, Rachel. You owed him nothing, but he still owes me.”

The girl got up, walked to the entrance and touched the wooden logs surrounding the doorframe, caressing them slowly and avoiding the splinters. Whatever her mother said, it felt like a trade, an eerie, fiddly, bizarre exchange. Her past bartered for the bright, sunny future. Frank Bowers, dead and buried traded for a chance to talk to her mother. Justice wasn’t something that Rachel was used to, even if hoping to make a career out of it. It was also uneasy to accept that others had to clean up her jumble, as she would prefer to conquer her own merit.

Alone. Always alone in this and now she wasn’t so lonely. Strange.

“Would we…” A splinter almost got under her skin. A short grimace of pain twitched up Rachel’s lips. “Would you talk to me now, if you hadn’t learned about this? Or would you just visit him and not even stop to say hi, as always? Why did some bat-shit crazy things have to happen for you to actually emerge?”

Turning to Sera, she hoped that her mother would walk to her, but the woman didn’t move, still occupying the old, wooden bench. Keeping their distance was a game even more exhausting than yelling and bringing up all of their wrongdoings. Sera was a stranger, then she was her mom, then backtracking to become a visiting guest or an alien. On and off. Switching and turning. The splinter finally got its way in, cutting the skin. Rachel didn’t even blink, enjoying the piercing sting. It was kinda blissful.
“I didn’t want you to be burdened by an ex-junkie who gave birth to you and now can complicate your life even more.” The harsh truth was the fastest way to explain and quicker to blurt out. Sera didn’t want to elaborate on all her mistakes, cutting to the chase. “I didn’t want to be a problem in your life, Rachel. I was done with being a problem for anyone. I wanted to simplify your life not make it harder.”

Despite the first scratch, Rachel kept nibbling the wooden log persistently, partly hoping to get stabbed by yet another sliver. Her fingernails became black from scratching the surface, discovering how old and dirty the shed really was and wondering how many serious conversations it had witnessed. Maybe none at all, perhaps they were the first.

“And now you came off from the shadows exactly when needed.” She tried to get the splinter out but just pushed it deeper under the skin instead. “What a plot twist, really.”

Tired of repeating herself, Sera almost rolled her eyes, guilty of lack of patience as much as her daughter. The situation required endurance and she played her role as well as she could but was damn close to lose her composure.

“I believe you need my help now. It’s the right thing to do and I ain’t gonna do it behind your back. The situation changed a lot. You are an adult, a married woman now, independent.” Rachel peered at her in surprise. Sera opened her arms, clarifying. “Not under your father’s protection. You have your own life and started a family. You can accept me in your life or not, it’s up to you only.”

Her daughter tucked the stroke of blond hair behind her right ear. Uh, she had never thought about her relationship that way. Family. Nice way to say it. Well, Chloe would crack up hearing their marriage called by that term, but it was somehow true. It had been always an inner joke, something they were saying to each other during very intimate and tender moments. A family. Somebody else saying it aloud seemed odd. She stopped pecking on the splinters and walked a few steps back and forth, still feeling the bracelet in her jeans’ pocket.

“Up to me?” At first, she wanted to deny it right off the bat, trying to find a weak link, but there weren’t any. Sera was slowly gaining her respect and any obstinate claims of how she couldn’t believe her words were childish. The woman who gave birth to her might be an ex-junkie, a semi-criminal and more or less an outcast, but had already given her more freedom to choose than her own lovely father. This decision required way more reflection though. Rachel switched to the other subject still strolling around the shed. “Uh, I ain’t gonna lie, it’s… a relief that I don’t have to deal with Bowers anymore. We were stupid to think that we could do it alone. Chloe wanted to do it by herself, and it almost got her killed. He almost fucking killed her.” Clenching her fist was subconscious, the splinter dug deeper into her flesh, hurting more.

“Damn, it was really painful.” Sera got up preventing another waterfall of words and confessions about the blue-haired punk. Yes, Chloe was important, probably the most significant thing in Rachel’s life but she couldn’t hide behind her wife every single time they were discussing her own life. “With his fucking stash!” Sighing deeply, she walked to her daughter, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Did he hurt you?”

At first, Rachel didn’t absorb what she was asked about. Hurt? What kind of question was it? Was she talking about the beatings? The moments when he slapped her a few times? Then the hazel eyes grew bigger as she remembered that her mother heard Chloe saying this word, accusing him of something that he kinda did, but not and… Jesus, not now. Not this thing again.

Did she discuss it with her wife too? Did she?
“Leave it.” Her hand got brushed off from Rachel’s arm. Sera tilted her head not willing to give up. “It doesn’t matter!” Her daughter snuck out preventing herself from being cornered. “No, I don’t want to talk about this.”

Her mother didn’t want to push or interrogate her life, even if armed by a thousand questions, but in this one case, she didn’t plan to back off. This shed was too small for either of them to escape though. “Rachel, did he really hurt you?”

The blond hair swirled in a swift move when she snapped ready to explode, but then huddled hiding inside of her shoulders, trying to avoid the careful sight, abounded with compassion and... pity. Rachel hated pity. She hated being so desperately felt sorry for. It was taking away the whole strength she produced to live day after day with this... thing. No, this wasn’t something she wanted, no sympathy was needed, Frank couldn’t take this away as well.

“I deserved it!” She cried out.

“Rachel!” Sera jailed her in a rushed embrace. “Stop! Don’t you ever say that!”

Her daughter stormed out from a hug, almost ran away outside, but stopped rapidly, turned around and after a few short breaths pointed at her like Sera was the one to blame. Well, she was to some extent though.

She fucking was.

“Don’t you dare tell me what to do!” A scream was the last line of defense. “Yes, he hurt me. Yes, he made my life a living hell, but I asked him for it! I asked him for the dope, for the first shot, for the first fix. I cheated with him on my girlfriend that I was crazy in love with. I hurt her, and he hurt me. Fair, right?” The splinter got deeper as she clenched her fists. “Chloe still has those stupid trust issues because of Bowers and him trying to fucking stab her really didn’t help. But I started the whole bullshit myself, paying with my rich daddy’s money and I would keep doing it and fucking him if…”

She paused raising her hands, clenching her teeth hard. If he hadn’t done it, if he hadn’t forced himself, perhaps Rachel would keep going back to him over and over. She gasped trying to communicate through gestures, as speech was not available at the moment. A short, dramatic break helped though. Breathe in, breathe out, just as she was taught. Thank you, drama class. “You know, what? I’m fine now. I’m fine because of Chloe and thanks to Chloe. I don’t want to have any fucking dark secrets related to him. I don’t want to deal with him anymore either.”

The decision was made, and Rachel almost didn’t notice. Frank Bowers dying on the roadside wasn’t exactly going to turn heads or raise suspicions, but she couldn’t allow it to happen. She wanted to be a lawyer, sure, not a fucking judge, having the ultimate power and supported by the twelve angry men. Rachel really wanted him to fucking stop caring about her, move on but oh, not like that, not to that extent. If he hurt Chloe, she would be more vindictive, but well, he didn’t, right? He did, but he didn’t.

Her blue treasure was safe.

“Alright.” Sera was watching her proud and concerned at the same time. “We will send him somewhere... he won’t be a problem anymore.”

“Like where? To the arctic?”

“To jail.” Her mother shrugged coldly as if it was the most obvious and natural thing. “Prison.”

So simple that Rachel wanted to slap herself. No one had thought about it before. She wanted to talk,
to convince him, instead of just calling the cops and getting him arrested. His record was so extensive that locking him up shouldn’t be a problem. Drug, abuse, any kind of violation. Simple, so simple and they were seriously discussing murder. Holy shit, it was indeed a miracle he wasn’t already just a number in a state prison.

Killing or freedom. What a choice.

“Funny. That was actually a card my father was usually playing.” The splinter was damn stubborn and didn’t want to slip out. Rachel was trying to get it out with her teeth but failed. James Amber loved to scare people with his enormous influence and taking advantage of it in the worst possible moments. She was pretty damn sure her own father was behind Chloe being expelled and arrested for vandalism, searched a few times and then arrested again for possession. Sure, her dad was also the one who got her out of the jail cell, but the gesture wasn’t that generous. Just a fucking play, one more act of mercy to show little, poor Rachel how badly she had chosen. Sera didn’t have to know all the details though, knowing more of his shenanigans than James’s only daughter.

“He was waving it instead of actually putting in on the table, even if he had the authority to deal with this asshole before.” It was hard not to agree with this statement. Sera’s ex-husband could really solve this issue with a single snap. “Does James know?”

Her daughter almost freaked out but stopped the panic attack half-way.

“No.” She turned away, pretty damn persistent. Letting her father know would be worse than this thing itself. Jesus, it would start a never-ending lecture about how much it was her fault and what she should’ve done. Not a chance. Not James. “And he won’t know. Only Chloe and you and…” No, Victoria couldn’t obtain this info. Mark Jefferson suspected something, but it wasn’t said. Yet. “…And probably Chloe’s friend, Max. That’s it. I didn’t really advertise it. I don’t want to.”

Sera nodded slowly, not surprised. It was hard for any girl to confess such a thing, especially if the accusation could be discharged entirely or welcomed with an icy shrug. It was a miracle that Chloe didn’t hadn’t strangled Bowers, so desperate to protect her girlfriend, but James would start hell for sure. Knowing from experience of how crazy he could get, even if not in the best terms with his daughter, Sera smirked thinking that Frank should be damn grateful for Rachel for keeping quiet. On the other hand, the famous DA with all his connections, snitches, contacts and power had no damn idea what was going on. What a dumb, annoying asshole. His little daughter had to go through so much, with her self-blame, drugs, relationships, dreams fading away and apparently, he wasn’t making it easier, on the contrary. On top of everything, Rachel wasn’t even sure how to call it, still wondering if it had been somehow consensual! The painful uncertainty was still visible in her eyes, the way she avoided any kind of touch now, the way she was breathing. Whatever she thought it was, Chloe was damn right.

It was rape.

Rachel wasn’t the only one burdened by such thing. She wasn’t alone in this experience either. Unfortunately, or maybe everything happened for a reason?

“I’ve been there,” Sera said slowly. Bad things can happen to bad people, and she hadn’t been a good person for quite some time. “I know how hard it is, Rachel. I’ve been a victim…”

“I’m not a victim!” The wooden logs got hit by a tightly clenched fist.

The rain stopped in a second, as rapidly as it started. Rachel was panting wildly, with her eyes burning, so scared, angry, terrified and nervous. Sera tried to reach her hand, but the gesture got rejected. There was no need for another attempt as they would end up in a catfight or worse.
“Alright.” Her mother rose her hands. “I’m sorry. Please. I just wanted to know that I… I get you. I wasn’t a perfect mother, I wasn’t a mother for years. I gave up my chances to even see you or talk to you for the sake of your future. I made a mistake, a terrible mistake. I’m not even asking for us to be close. I just wanted you to know that I’m here for you if you need... or want…” Now she was begging, literally begging for another chance. Her little daughter needed her but could still decide to walk off, reject, shun her. Her little daughter so severely hurt, so unsure and scared.

Scared of her.

It was hard to find sense in it, making a decision with her head not so clear. Rachel frowned and paced in place, turning back and forth not sure what to so. Every solution seemed heartbreaking in some aspect though. Telling Sera to go to hell wasn’t an option, accepting her back was even more convoluted. And Frank. And the ‘r’ word. At the beginning she wanted to see Sera on her knees and now, achieving it, didn’t feel much victorious. Here she was then, even if not literally, a soul begging to be heard, and it didn’t make Rachel feel better by any means.

No happy-go-lucky outcomes. Damn it.

“I know. I appreciate it... Mom.” The term appeared and disappeared depending on Rachel’s mood, or rather state of mind. When angry she couldn’t force herself to call Sera differently but by her name. When sensitive and moved she switched back to the other option. Now, in between, she was still confused by the semantics but making progress step by step. Playing though and relentless was getting exhausting. “I just don’t know what to do with it. You appeared again. How do I know you’re not gonna vanish like the last time?”

Trust and disappointment. Two sides of the same coin. The currency was in play again though, Sera had to take this chance.

“I won’t. There is literally nothing stopping me now. Nothing.” Then a wink appeared, as her mother got tired of a constant stream of self-explanations. Begging wasn’t something she was used to either. “Unless Chloe would oppose.”

Rachel would do anything to snuggle into her blue treasure’s arms, feel the familiar warmth, close herself in their private world and just stop fucking thinking. It wouldn’t be long till she saw her again, an hour maybe even less, but it seemed like never. Sera apparently mentioned Chloe to make her feel better, and hell yes, it was a brilliant move, clever. Her mother couldn’t know though that Rachel Amber, now Price, switched from one addiction to another and now she was seriously craving for the blue fix.

“She wouldn’t do such a thing.” She hid her hands in her pockets rushing to leave this place. Sera got the hint and nodded ready to get back on the trail. “Actually, you should thank her for the fact that we’re talking.”

They left the safe shelter, welcomed by the spooky humidity of a forest that just finished showering. Walking got harder now since they had to wander between the piles of mud and streams of the storm’s leftovers. Rachel found the right path again and started the hike, being followed by her mother without hesitation. She always liked the trips to the woods just before the first snow. Young winters were a little bit cold, but refreshing, not forcing her to drain in her sweat or scorching as a sunny-side-up egg on a frying pan.

“Did Chloe have to convince you?” Sera asked keeping up with her.

“No, but it was partly the reason why I wanted to meet you. Clear it up. And she...” Rachel tripped over a perfidious collapsed tree branch, but her mom saved her from falling. Those climbs in
December were damn unsafe. They both smiled. “She gives me the strength to face things, you know? And keeps me away from trouble.”

They separated because of the landscape, not displeasure of holding each other’s hands. It was just more comfortable to walk independently in their own rhythm. Sera hummed thinking if she should ask more about Chloe, apparently the most central and vital thing in her daughter’s life. Again, not surprising, she was pretty fond of the blue pirate, knowing that Rachel could easily pick worse. The most important things, however, had the tendency to become the most dangerous and hurtful. It would be a good idea to stop judging by her own recollections.

“Including drugs?” This wasn’t an attack, just a calm query.

“Including.” Rachel nodded, knowing that her blue treasure didn’t strike as a person who would avoid any kind of vice. Well, she was used to the fact that people liked to judge a book by its cover only, particularly when it came to her girl. Rebels or not, they were recently behaving as careless as preschoolers. Except smoking. And beer. And whiskey from time to time. And other things… But no drugs though. “When I was so deep in this stuff, she literally locked me down in her room and put up with all my shit, until the worst had passed. I was such a bitch to her though, the whole fucking time. I almost lost her. She almost lost me. And then my fantastic father wanted to get rid of her.” Annoyed, Rachel rolled her eyes. “Chloe was good only temporarily, not permanently…”

Dwelling on how unfair her father’s judgment was would leave Sera even more guilty. Rachel forced herself to shut up, however it would be easier to complain about her dad’s mistreats towards her girl than how the famous DA was training his daughter. Deceiving her mother wasn’t easy though. Sera was already angry at her ex-husband, promising herself to talk to James one day, including his arrogance when it came to Chloe. Every parent complained more or less about their children’s choices, but the blue pirate proved her value and dedication in more ways than one. James Amber had to be stupid or blinded by his own ego not to absorb this fact.

And he was so charming and sweet when in high school.

“How is your father treating you now?” Chloe told her a thing or two about the Ambers, but Sera wanted to hear Rachel’s version. Not remarkably, the answer was damn limited. Simple and soured by a shrug.

“Fine, I guess. He sends me money, pays for school. He stays away, living his dream in California, not interrupting much.” Rachel smirked. “I have my life here. With her.”

They kept hiking almost reaching the top of the route, and that made them both a little bit upset and worry. Their journey was almost over, and even if the new beginning was still a possibility, they would have to go their separate ways before the day’s end. It was almost sunset. They hadn’t promised each other anything yet, it might not even happen since mother and daughter were both wounded by the broken words and still uncertain on which route to take to actually get closer.

“Do you need anything?” The need to offer Rachel everything or something at least was intense, almost painful. Sera really wanted to give her something more than just an old, worn-out bracelet.

Her daughter just shook her head, assuming it was about money.

“No, we’re fine.”

Step after step. The trail was going up and up, almost reaching the grey, dark clouds. The storm was still there, now shattered and exhausted, but willing to strike after gaining some strength and resting a bit. Frankly, Rachel didn’t mind rain that much, she liked it. It helped her to keep her own private fire
under control.  

“You know you’re not alone.” Sera tried again. “I know I haven’t been part of your life, and you have the right not to trust me, but you can always ask for help. Any kind of help.” She wanted to add that the proposition included both her daughter and Chloe, but Rachel was thinking about them as a whole anyway. It is evident that the blue pirate would benefit from anything that would be offered and, frankly, Sera didn’t mind.

“I don’t need any help.”

“In case you… or the circumstances change, here is my number.” She handed Rachel a piece of paper with a few digits noted. Her daughter expected a business card though and frowned seeing the handwritten numbers. A small gesture but Sera didn’t want her to think that it was another business issue, another transaction. James was probably far more official, she wanted it to be personal. “You can call anytime or message me if you feel like it.”

“Thank you.” The piece of paper landed in the same pocket as the bracelet. “I will… keep that in mind.”

They had reached the top of the cliff finally and came close to the edge, enjoying the panoramic view of the bay, with little houses, miniature people, and toy cars, hustling and moving around like bees in a hive. The gloomy sky was still heavy with unreleased rain, as the labor got cut out in the middle, but generously waited for them to finish, to be done with their meeting. Rachel tried to smoke, but the wind was too strong, so she gave up straightening up and raising her jacket’s collar, hiding from the breeze. Sera seemed immune to the sharp gusts though, or she didn’t care that much.

The hiking trail as a meeting place was an unusual choice, but when Rachel picked it, she wanted to have an opportunity to turn away at any moment, break it off if displeased or frustrated. She peered at her mother thinking about how far they had gone, how huge of a progress this trip really was. Yesterday Rachel had been doubting that they would ever exchange more than a few words and now she started to realize that this woman was indeed her ally, a parent, somebody who really cared. Nice. It was a very nice feeling.

“So, you and Chloe…” Sera moved closer.

The fire burnt out again in the hazel eyes. So here they were. All the kind words and tapping her arm confirming that the blue pirate was a great gal were just a game. Of course, Sera would like to express her concern finally, probably planning it from the very beginning. Oh, disappointment, my old friend, never let me down. Rachel scoffed.

“Please don’t tell me I should’ve waited and I shouldn’t marry her or give me any other lecture because if that’s the case, I don’t want to hear it.” She wanted to walk off, but her mother stopped her.

“No lecture.” She cut her firmly, a bit upset that Rachel didn’t give her the benefit of the doubt. What were they teaching the kids in those pre-law classes? “I’m happy you two are together.”

“Like… for real?”

“Yes, for real. She is a good kid. A beautiful woman, I should say.” Rachel blushed beautifully, delighted and embarrassed at the same time. That was a first though. Usually fighting for acceptance for her relationship was hard enough, and now her mother was congratulating her for a good score. Damn right, it was good. The best one. “You’re lucky she is yours, quite permanently now.” Sera
chuckled. “Chloe cares about you a lot, and I don’t think she will ever stop. She saved your life and gave you more than your own family, even with way fewer resources and support. If you blame her that she didn’t tell you something, or she told you too much, don’t. And when it comes to trust…” She sighed, afraid of the whole speech becoming a lecture anyway. “She is dealing with it exceptionally well regarding the situation. She loves you. She married you. She is planning your life together on a pretty large scale now…” The blue jabber about a house, kids, and a family was still raising eyebrows, but Sera knew Chloe really meant it. Good Lord, this pirate was really desperate to make this thing work. “The trust can be rebuilt, you just have to be patient.”

To be frank, she had her reservations, and despite her unquestionable support, Sera was still wondering if those two would survive longer than a few years. Now obviously in love and charmed by each other, they wouldn’t even consider a different future or alternative outcome. She didn’t dare to ask if Chloe was Rachel’s first love, but looking at her daughter’s wedding band, she suspected it strongly. Married or not, they weren’t even twenty, and high school flings rarely lasted longer than the end of college. She and James were an example of a spectacular failure, but they had never had to deal with deadly drug dealers and such profound family drama at that young age. If those two survived that kind of hurricane, they could outlast literally everything. Or so Sera wished.

She really hoped so.

“A mother’s advice?” Rachel was taken aback by this stance and quite nervous again. It was good to hear that somebody close really appreciated her choices although it was so unusual it always seemed fake, despite the intentions. Used to a brawl and fight, she realized that it was another learning curve on how to take that kind of fusion of advice and compliments. Not fucking easy.

Nothing today was easy.

“I have one more if you want.” Sera’s eyes got narrow in an impish manner, but she was pretty damn serious. “Don’t fuck this up. The ones like her are a rare breed.”

Rachel bit her lip.

“They are. She is.” Alright, it was time to test her mother’s resistance and throw one more thing in her face. She would have to get used to yet another thing, there was no common road for them. “So, no complaints that your daughter is gay?”

“Complaints?” Her mother frowned as if it was the most ridiculous thing she could’ve heard. “No. It’s your life, Rachel. You are who you are, and I love you. Maybe one day you will learn how much,” she added very softly.

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“Your sister?” Mark Jefferson peered at him and got back to his magazine, turning pages slowly and skipping though the descriptions focusing only on the visuals and photos. Colorful advertisement, fashion stripping the objects from any kind of decency, the porcelain faces of the models. Vanity. He was rarely impressed by the commercial publications but still willing to judge every one of them, fascinated by its tackiness and vulgarity. Any piece of trash or bad taste’s debris could be an inspiration, a beginning of unprecedented journey. So much to do though, so much to discover and change.
So much.

Nathan waited in silence, hoping for a few more words, a sentence directing his answer or how he should react. His mentor was supposedly ignoring him though, browsing the publication unhurriedly with an enigmatic smile appearing and vanishing on his lips. It was a bad sign usually. Very bad sign.

“Yes, they let her to come back,” he confessed closing his eyes waiting for the verdict. It would be stupid to hide this information from Mark, as it would be so easily accessible later. His own father loved to chat with his teacher, not suspecting how grim and luscious the lectures had become.

Sweet and scary. The darkroom was cold though. Nathan was freezing.

Jefferson licked the top of his finger and turned another glossy page. The paper was sticky and dirty, just like the whores on the photos. “How does it make you feel?” He asked calmly, casually unbuttoning the collar of his white shirt and making himself more comfortable.

“I don’t feel anything. Not much. Just… nothing.” It was hard to swallow, hard to breathe. Nathan nodded, bending his twitching fingers in a nervous move. “Really nothing.”

“Don’t you lie to me, Nathan. Don’t lie.” Mark started to groom his beard gently, still focusing his whole attention on the magazine. “I know that you still love your sister. You miss her.” Lick, a page got turned. “You still have hopes.” Another page, almost the end cover.

“I don’t. I really don’t.”

The magazine got tossed at the glass table and Jefferson finally looked at him, with concern and worry. Kristen Prescott could become a huge burden for his pupil, distracting him and battering his vision. It was tempting just to scold Nathan, reprimand or punish, but Mark knew from first-hand experience that the objects which remained close were the hardest to transform. It took him years to finally elude his own expectations and connection of errors linked to his own mother. Years of constant doubts and reservations. Years of sitting on the sharp, spikey fence hurting himself with lack of decision. Giving the context, his protegee shouldn’t be blamed by his own objections but the teachers always expect their students to do better and suffer less.

“It’s natural, understandable and quite expected. Emotions make us human, make us worthy of existing and superior against all the other creatures. Sentiments, however, are dangerous, keep us in place, tangle us with the invisible net of expectations.” His sight became softer, almost loving. “You are sick, Nathan, guilty of a cognitive dissonance. I can see two mutually exclusive beliefs grinding inside of you, fighting like two vicious dogs, for your attention and recognition. They’re tearing you down, dragging you so low that you might forget your destiny, your fate.”

“I know,” his pupil said only, lowering his head.

Good. Awareness was the key to success, the very first step to the highway of freedom. Mark Jefferson got up, unbuttoning his shirt even more thinking how hurtful and wonderful would be to change Kristen Prescott, the unruliest one from the family, the most bold and rebellious. It was extremely risky though, but Mark Jefferson was willing to sacrifice a lot for his student. Every huge step, every strive for perfection was risky.

The price of becoming a god.

“I want you to stay hungry, Nathan.” He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, noticing how wet his jacket was. Young Prescott was trembling, although still standing straight, not looking for his own
comfort. “I want you to stay worthy. I will help you though.” His shirt got open widely showing the chest marked with a few scars and burnt marks. “I know exactly how to help you.”

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“She is waiting for you.” Sera noticed Chloe first when they started to saunter again leaving the cliff’s peak and heading to the lighthouse. Her daughter immediately rose her head, looking around, but it wasn’t hard to spot her pirate. They were still pretty far away, but the truck, parked as illegally as possible, barring the trail and the entrance to the building, was impossible to miss. The blue rebel was leaning against the rusty side of her vehicle, smoking nervously. Getting drag after drag, Chloe kept lurking at her watch, at the dark sky and her phone in a very anxious manner, obviously awaiting somebody, and they both knew who she expected to see.

A burst of sunshine broke the dark, filthy clouds in half.

Rachel smiled.

“Yeah, she is.” It would be impossible to hide her excitement, and she didn’t really want to. Despite the gloomy winter her world became way more colorful now, in favor of blue.

Oh, they had noticed her, and now they were talking. Chloe sniffed. Cool, gossiping probably. Just fucking great, right? A small, reluctant smirk appeared as the blue rebel wasn’t sure if her company was needed or even anticipated. Too nervous to call Rachel she took the liberty to show up on her own and was damn ready to turn back if asked. Her girl didn’t mind though judging by the way she smiled and waved from a distance. Chloe peered at Sera who was watching her as well, not sure if she should come closer to say hi or ignore her presence. It was confusing even like with normal parents, with additional ones it was getting more complicated.

Uh, well, shit. A family business, right?

“Don’t let her wait too long, Rachel,” said Sera, sensing that her daughter was postponing the moment of separation, not really keen on finishing it by herself, but growing impatient to get back to her wife. It was time to go, though. Time to let her go. “Even if you think that she’ll wait forever.”

Rachel got the hint, but still didn’t rush down to the lighthouse. Chloe just finished one cig and lit up another. They had maybe three minutes before the fresh cancer stick would die on the ground among many others. The blue pirate had to wait here for quite some time, including the latest storm, completely alone and exposed to the wild tempest. A small sacrifice, but Rachel’s smile grew wider.

“I’m not taking her for granted, mom,” she replied. “I made this mistake once, and nothing good came out of it.”

“Smart cookie.” Sera hugged her. Strongly, firmly, without hesitation. “My smart cookie.”

They stayed there for a moment, not willing to separate but finally stepped back sharing a few promises that it wouldn’t be the last time they would meet. Sera’s eyes got wet, as she was watching Rachel walk away slowly. Sharing smiles and her turning around a few times was another promise, this time unspoken.

“Hi.” Chloe reached to her instinctively, ditching the cig.
“Hi back.” Rachel took her hand and placed it on her waist, dragging her wife closer. “Come here, pirate.” She surrounded herself with her arms, the smell of the old leather jacket and a half pack of smoked Marlboro, and then pulled her blue treasure in for a long, slow kiss showing all her longing.

That was the flavor she had been missing the whole afternoon.

Chloe responded patiently at first, but usually when nervous, couldn’t stop her own passion from emerging, pressing her lips harder and messing the blond hair with a tight grasp. She slowed down after a few fervent seconds, recalling that it wasn’t the right time and place. Then again, she found herself being pushed against the rusty side of the truck with her girl’s leg stroking her thigh. Uh, it was going too fast way too quickly. Rachel didn’t need the flames of fire though, but a patient support of anneal embers, even if striving for fewer clothes and a more intimate setting. The change to a slow, tender pace was accepted gladly, as it was assumed that the blue pirate would freaking notice where they were and in whose company.

Chloe stroked the shape of her neck, the jawline and touched the half-open lips still tempted to continue. The hazel eyes were flashing with pure joy. A few spots of sadness, ache and distress were still visible at the bottom, but it could be cured with a few more kisses and a huge cuddling session. She missed her like crazy, feeling as nervous as her blond angel not sure of what Rachel had been dealing with. Sera was cool, but everything could go wrong anyway as always when James or Bowers the scumbag were discussed. Her wife’s hand wandered behind her shirt letting Chloe know that they wouldn’t chat about anything for quite some time. Rachel wanted her touch, not her speech. Yeah, well, the blue pirate got it. She wasn’t that great at talking anyway.

Their lips almost met again.

“Your mom is watching…”

“Well, she has to deal with the view then.” Rachel brushed off a few lonely wet strokes of the blue hair, so gentle and tender with every single touch that her girl started to wonder what Sera had told her. It had to be good though, regarding the huge smile. “Did you wait for long?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

“No.” Chloe chuckled and smiled shyly. “There is no such thing as too long.”

“Bullshit.”

Their foreheads met for a moment, and then the blue pirate opened the door for her wife, inviting her to take a seat. She looked around, but the cliff was empty as Sera disappeared, respectively not bothering them longer with her presence. Chloe kinda liked the lady though, but it was awkward to kiss anybody’s daughter in front of their parents. Just in case things would get out of control, and it occurred hella often with Rachel.

They got inside the car, and her blond angel could finally relax, drowning in her seat and putting one leg on the dashboard. The contents in her pocket didn’t let her make herself entirely comfortable, so she struggled a little, trying to get something out of her damn tight jeans. The phone number and the bracelet got tossed in the glove compartment, firmly hit to open then double kicked to lock down. This car was a fantastic, marvelous piece of garbage in every single way possible and nothing was working correctly. Nothing, except them. Rachel was thinking for a moment of noting Sera’s number in her phone, but brushed this thought away, aware that it would be hella tempting to call her too damn often. All the treasures were way safer here and within reach regardless.
She noticed that the blue rebel hadn’t started the car yet, watching her calmly and trying not to interrupt much with the long and painful process of putting her own mind in order. As presumed, the blond thoughts were all over the place. Chloe saw the bracelet as well but decided to defer from any comment, not sure how she was feeling about it. Her girl didn’t look like super amused and stuff by getting it back, but obviously Frank couldn’t have it, Sera would never let him keep it. The blue pirate’s opinion about this problematic jewellery was not important anyway.

“Rach? Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Rachel ran her fingers through her hair now in terrible dismay, tangled by the wind, hike and the make-out session. “It was just… a lot.”

Chloe tapped the steering wheel, thinking. Waiting by the lighthouse for a few hours let her plan a few things in case her girl would like to fade out or forget about some uncomfortable shit. They could go to the beach, visit the junkyard, meet some friends, see a freaking movie. Yeah, the blunt and crazy pirate wouldn’t mind taking her girl out for a proper date. Like it was family business shit and stuff.

“Do you wanna go somewhere?” She asked coyly. “Release some steam?”

Rachel shook her head, leaning in her seat even more. More walking could literally kill her, not to mention that her worn-out sneakers were pretty damn wet. Going out with Chloe was always pretty wild, and she had a decent share of madness today. The freaking storm could make a comeback at any moment as well.

“I just want to go home. And then…” Her finger flirtatiously played with the ripped hole on Chloe’s thigh. “…release some steam.”

The blue eyes sparkled as the key got turned in the ignition. The truck breathed out loudly, ready for a ride. Any ride though, anywhere they wanted. The wheels turned as the blue driver started the long process of backing out from the cliff.

“Home it is,” she agreed pressing on the gas pedal.
Patches and Wraps

Her fingers were stiff and rigid, bitten by the sharp fangs of frost and humiliated by the constant, nervous bending. She looked at the red skin, rubbing the top of her palm quickly, but it didn’t bring any relief or consolation. They said winter would treat them easily this year, but, like many times before, they lied. The gloves peered at her, hanging sadly from her coat’s pockets, but she decided to drag out her phone instead and started to go through Christmas wishes, Santa Claus pictures and all that cheesy crap that people were sending each other despite the lack of any contact the whole year prior. Emojis with red hats blinked in greetings and very similar messages. So generic that only the name of the sender was helping her to acknowledge who was it from. Amazingly, so many of them remembered, or she could just blame Facebook for the sudden recollection of her existence. Bitching and complaining about the fake cheerfulness would be also framed as part of the social media ritual, so she shook off the temptation, smiling weakly instead.

The cold was somewhat refreshing.

Getting used to the constant tremble, she scrutinized the crowd, mostly enthusiastic and chatting in excitement, making plans for the very next day. Not many people signed up for the last scheduled trip, but she was entirely sure her journey would be as ordinary as possible, with crying babies, loud coughs and not enough space for elbows. The small bus station, located just between a burger shed and 7-Eleven didn’t offer much shelter, harshly warning every future traveler that whatever ride they were planning it wouldn’t be easy. For all of them it was just an obstacle before a happy ending, a merry time with family and friends. For her, a sad reminder that the road never ended nor got cleaner. The smell of gas exhaust and chugging of huge, worn-out tires of shiny, silver Greyhounds were making her nauseous, reminding that the time to take off was coming and Max Caulfield wasn’t sure if she was thrilled or scared of the upcoming trip.

She sighed deeply, leaning on the grey wall, dirty from the fumes and begging for a repaint, thinking of how much she would prefer to take a train, but Arcadia Bay’s public transport couldn’t care less about her wishes. Most people traveled in their own comfy and warm cars though, at their own speed and stopping as many times as they liked, but it was yet another luxury she couldn’t afford. Checking her phone, she tuned out all the festive giggles and talks around, focusing on her own private, digital world and pretending to be busy, just in case someone would like to start a conversation. Holding a mobile was making her invisible and untouchable, immune to any festive greetings or careful looks. Fine for Max Caulfield. She liked invisibility or was used to it.

One and the same.

Suddenly, the store door busted open as Chloe stormed out, swearing loudly, almost ramming one of the running kids outside and tripping over somebody’s suitcase. It was impossible to stay anonymous and transparent for the blue, reckless rebel and she didn’t give a flying fuck about the reproving looks. She just shrugged, sniffed and walked directly to Max, not bothered by the fact that her friend was supposedly occupied by the piece of technology.

“And I’m back.” She announced and frowned, seeing her arrival didn’t make any impression. Her friend had this annoying tendency to disappear inside of herself even if left for only five minutes. Chloe didn’t have time or hands for a subtle way to get her attention though, bumping her arm instead. “Dude, you have to glue yourself off that screen, especially since you will need a free hand. Here.” Max’s cold fingers got even icier when forced to grasp on a huge, plastic cup. The phone almost landed on the frozen, concrete pavement. “That’s for you. You might use something sweet because, you know… Christmas.” Chloe grinned and slurped her own beverage apparently very
pleased with herself.

“Chloe, you know it’s cold outside?” Max blinked, staring at the cup unsurely. “I’m gonna freeze inside out.”

Her friend rolled her eyes, adjusting the beanie that got a bit crooked during the battle at the 7-Eleven entrance and started to chew on the poor plastic straw, trying to get more of the icy, sticky sweetness. It was easy for her to keep up with the winter tradition of eating as many frozen treats as her stomach could bear, since this time she was appropriately dressed to the weather. First time ever. Max suspected that a certain blonde wife was tired of serving as a private nurse and delivering hot tea with chicken soup, so simply prevented it from happening. No one could stop Chloe from a drinking ass-cold Slurpee though.

No one.

“I know!” The words almost drowned in one big gulp. “But they had these special mint hot chocolate ones. And I got gingerbread sticks too!” She waved with more sugar, this time in more solid form and scowled noticing that Max didn’t even try her treat, playing with the cup’s edge instead. “Hey, what’s up? Is something wrong? C’mon, Super Max, Slurpee for your thought.” At first, Chloe thought that the loud hum of the Greyhound leaving the station could drown down the response, but Max remained silent still looking at her shoes. Old, simple converses were covered with frost and burnt out in thousands of steps already taken, begging for retirement. Well, it wouldn’t occur anytime soon, there was another hike awaiting her already, even if in a belly of a snuffling bus. “Is that about your folks?” The blue pirate asked gently.

A long deep sigh meant Chloe nailed it. Guessing your friend’s thoughts was a good sign, right?

“Yeah and no,” Max confessed and finally took the first sip. Damn, it was really cold. And disgusting. She sipped more. “Uh… It’s just so weird to come back home after everything, spending time with them and pretend that you know…”

“Everything is fine? Yeah, I know that feeling.” Chloe nodded and scratched her head, crooking her new, woolen beanie again. Her friend wasn’t talking to her family very often since she started college, carefully keeping them out of the loop and not even stuttering about the most groundbreaking events in her life. The Caulfields had no idea about Steph, the breakdowns, problems at school and financial struggles, constantly assured that Blackwell was a blast and there was nothing to worry about. Putting up an act for a fifteen-minute phone call was one thing, keeping her guard up for the whole week was entirely different cup of Slurpee. Chloe sighed. “You can always stay in the Bay though, spend Christmas with Rachel and me and…”

Raising her hand, the little freckle shook her head grimacing weakly. The Madsens were still adjusting to have one more permanent family member at home and adding a confused and sad childhood friend to the mix was a terrible idea. Joyce would welcome her for sure, Rachel would try her best and even watch one of their favorite Peanuts movies together, but even Chloe knew it would be damn awkward. Perhaps not as uncomfortable as getting back to Seattle, dining with her parents with a nice, polite smirk and keeping up with appearances, but a discomfiture had many faces. And flavors. Max sipped on the chocolate treat noisily.

“Nah, my mom said she prepared something special for my dad and me, so I have to go I guess. They are still trying to patch it up.” A weak smile was accompanied by the straw abuse. Drinking this thing was a hardship. “I’m one of those patches.”

Chloe nodded slowly, leaning against the wall by Max’s side and watching the colorful, coat-wrapped crowd at the bus stop. The buzzing ants of Arcadia couldn’t wait to get the fuck out of this
town. She opened her mouth to say something, but only the winter haze of her breath escaped, mixing with grey engines’ exhalations. Still a better response than any random, semi-cheerful ramble. The blue pirate scoffed, hating those goodbyes, forcing to participate in an awkward and long wait, counting the minutes to the departure that none of them were looking forward to. A silly, social torture, a pathetic ritual, just like those decorated trees, blinking lights and multiplied wishes from everybody, including fucking Victoria Chase who dared to send her a text with all the best crap and emoticon of a pine. Bitch had game.

“For how long?” Chloe asked, politely texting back ‘you too, fuck u’.

“Just a couple of days. I won’t let you celebrate New Year’s Eve without me.” Max poked the blue chest and winked without a smile. Her mom really wanted her to stay till January, bribing with visiting all her favorite galleries and even traveling to New York for some show, but she would gladly return as fast as possible. Arcadia Bay might be boring and not offering much entertainment, but it felt like home. Seattle did not. It never did.

“Damn right.” Chloe winked back and threw out the empty cup, already done with her Slurpee. “You ain’t gonna miss this one.”

She started to unwrap the plastic foil hungry for the bitter taste of smoke, still feeling the mint chocolate flavor at the tip of her tongue. Max watched Chloe’s struggle, grateful that the loud sound of unpacking Marlboros didn’t force them to talk. That was the best thing about her friend, who never asked to elaborate about her situation, just simply sensed what she was going through, and enjoying a lack of conversation as much as the constant chatting. People were watching them in disapproval when the first cig got lit up but were too respectful to mention that smoking was strictly prohibited so close to the station. Chloe didn’t look like somebody who would take any kind of reprimand in that matter or react nicely to scolding, although Max knew she would walk a few steps away if asked.

The image of a bad girl sometimes came in handy.

“Can you give me one?” Chloe flinched when Max took one smoke, stealing the lighter as well. Shrugging, she covered her friend from the cold gusts of wind, shielding the flame. The little freckle inhaled, waited a second, waited another, and started to cough desperately. “Thanks. Uh... Jesus, I forgot how terrible they are.”

“Look at this wild Christmas card.” The blue pirate answered slowly, noticing that Max’s fingers were trembling a bit. It wasn’t her place to lecture anybody about the tobacco use, especially in stressful situations like this one, but she had to say something. A joke. Maybe. Uh. “That’s not something I expected from my dear mate. You never told me that all you wanted to get from Santa was cancer.”

“Spare me.” The next attempt of feeding herself with a drag of smoke went better. Max peered at her, hiding in a smolder. “I can pick my own Christmas gifts.”

The blue rebel opened her eyes widely, bit on the cig and took off her backpack instantly, dropping it with a loud clang on the frozen pavement. Then she kneeled in front to of it, searching for something hurriedly, turning the contents inside and out, back and forth and cursing in murmur. Max’s eyebrow furrowed, but said nothing, observing the amount of garbage thrown outside. Old magazines, a notepad, empty packs of cigarettes, a squeezed beer can, some papers, an old chemistry test, a few half-eaten candy bars. The exploration got the rest of the passengers’ attention as their curiosity grew wondering what else this punk rebel could keep in her worn-out sack.
“Fuck that. I have an actual one. Two ones. Presents.” Chloe mumbled, digging deeper and wondering why she would even keep all this shit, carrying it around the whole time. It was hard to talk with a smoke in her mouth. “I almost forgot. This is from me, and this… This from my beloved wife.” She handed her two boxes, one carefully packaged and decorated with a beautiful red ribbon and the other, recklessly wrapped in Christmas paper and secured with duct tape. Max didn’t have to ask which one was from whom.

“Rachel bought me a gift?” She turned the bigger and more watchfully prepared package in her hands. It had a small card and everything, like very thoughtful. Kinda official. Offish.

Chloe scoffed, clutching everything back and getting up.

“Why are you surprised? Of course, she did. She cares about you. Just…” Confronted with the confused gaze, the blue eyes disappeared in the shadow of the crooked beanie. “She doesn’t’ really get how to talk to you and stuff. Sorry, that Rachel didn’t…” Chloe tapped out the ash, grimacing a bit. She was never a good liar. “…Couldn’t come and give it to you in person. She had some shopping to do.”

“No, I get it.” The little freckle nodded hiding the gifts in her own bag. Rachel, despite her reservations and a decent amount of jealousy, was civil enough not to put herself in the picture very often, avoiding her with a carefully balanced grace. It was sad, thoughtful and nice at the same time.

“This is better. Like between you and me. I’m sorry I didn’t get you anything yet. I just… I kinda forgot that the holidays were coming and… Uhm…” She felt the blue hand on her arm and noticed that she lowered her head and didn’t even look at Chloe during her explanation. The previous few weeks, even months, had been so distracting that Max couldn’t wrap her head around about the simplest things like packing or wearing the shoes appropriate to the weather. Picking gifts, even if one of her favorite things ever, was out of her range at the moment.

“So, you will get me something when you get back, no problem. Don’t you open them before tomorrow!” Chloe grinned way too cheerfully, showing it was no big deal. She always preferred to give more than receiving though and didn’t expect anything in return. Max’s explanation was making her uneasy though. “After a hot chocolate and a whole plate of cookies. Deal?”

“Deal.” Her friend smiled back at her.

Max’s bus finally reached its rightful stop and opened its doors, lurking at the impatient crowd to step in. Come, come, stew inside. A well-known commotion started as people rushed to the entrance, handing the luggage, yanking the kids and yelling at each other. Somebody slipped, somebody cried, somebody couldn’t find their tickets. Two girls were watching it without an urgency to get inside the steamy, steel gut and waiting for the worst to pass. That was it, though. The signal to leave finally appeared pressing them to say something final and perhaps joyful but they couldn’t force themselves to do so.

Chloe smoked one more.

“And say hi to your folks from us, ok?” She started merrily and then bit her lip. Greetings from a same-sex married couple could blow Max’s cover or provoke a few unwanted and uncomfortable questions. Her friend wasn’t out yet, still wriggling hearing the suggestions that dating a young, appropriate man would be very much appreciated. “Or maybe from me only?” Recommending erasing Rachel from the family photo made feel Chloe like a traitor, so she scratched her neck almost burning her fingers with the smoke’s embers. “Whatever you think would be better, ok?” And then she frantically changed the topic, falling into a swampier one. “How is Steph?”

Max froze for a second and then grabbed her suitcase’s handle getting ready to walk to the bus.
Chloe rolled her eyes, annoyed at herself, but it was just a question though that she hadn’t asked like for ages. It would be nice to know just in case she would bump into Gandalf the gay or meet her friends somewhere. Arcadia Bay was ridiculously small.

It was just a question though. Fuck. She followed Max to the bus, getting more and more angry. Damn it.

“The hell I know. She hasn’t texted me in weeks. Even now… I gave up too, so…” Giving her luggage away and seeing it disappearing in the bus’s basement, Max cleared her throat and turned back to her friend. “Please don’t tell me it’s fine or that she is just busy with stuff. Just… Not today, alright?” Steph Gingrich was still a big, painful wound in her heart that didn’t want to seal up, even if she was stitching and patching it up with all the distractions she could imagine. Not thinking about her probably ex-girlfriend was the only solution she had at the moment and now the reckless pirate ruined it so quickly.

The trip home will be delightful, rich with recollections.

“Today it’s actually hella fitting. Some miracles do happen, it’s…” Chloe hugged her very, very tightly. Damn, it would be nice to keep Max away from this Seattle place, bring her home, feed her with more ice cream and see her smile. Like for real, not this weak shit she was presenting lately. Just to keep her away from all the troubles. “It’s… You know... Christmas.”

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The small shopping center proudly called ‘Arcadia Mall’ barely deserved its glorious name. Just several stores under a simple roof, connected by a plain, tiled hallway, usually empty, filthy, dull and torpid. Most people traveled to Portland, Seattle or even California for a material hunt, disregarding convenience of this place or trying to ignore it. The mall didn’t have much to offer though, miraculously still remaining open and trying to attract with a few dusty and enormously expensive things and tons of cheap crap that was sometimes selling. A small-town shopping place was always smelling like pine floor cleaner, diversified with human sweat, dust and a choking scent of vanilla air fresheners. During this time of the year, the place was transforming magically though into an enchanted labyrinth full of wonders and secret spots, flickering with hundreds of lights and filling its granite roads with an enthusiastic crowd who was too sluggish or too busy to travel far for a Christmas shopping.

Rachel loved the supposed change, the vibrant, bright and colorful façade, not only because she particularly loved the holidays, but the modest, ordinary area with a few touches and bits of care got misshaped like in a fairy tale. The corners were still black from dirt and the pavement uneven, but it was a pleasure to wander around, stroll from store to store watching, touching and discovering this place anew. Silly, but such a transformation reminded her of her own life, still not cleaned up entirely, but packed with an enormous amount of happiness and great offers on good fortune. Rachel didn’t miss a sale on her own luck, and she wasn’t willing to overlook anything worth buying, totally absorbed by her shopping spree. Last year participating in it without participating had put her in a dark, filthy hole where no holidays were celebrated, now she was making up for it, picking up presents and small gifts for her family, thinking intensely what would make them smile, laugh or just simply serve as a reminder of care. The only thing she wished for was that her own personal change would last longer than Christmas decorations that would disappear, folded and stashed in some warehouse in a day or two.
Nah, her thing was permanent. Poor mall.

Dancing between the stores and kiosks, Rachel didn’t hesitate to drag out her debit card often, knowing for a fact that previous years hadn’t been that happy, generous or festive for Chloe nor her parents. Drowning in their misery and untold grief, they had kept up with the custom for the sake of habit, celebrating their desolation more than togetherness. The blue pirate, even with her girl around, had usually been grim and low-spirited, as everything reminded her of the good old days with William. Comparing what had been then and what was now was damn draining, and Rachel had always been quick to snap as well, tired of whining, complaining and outbursts of anger. Unfair and selfish, true, but being self-absorbed and taking part in the misery contest were always part of their revels. It was baffling how much they were hurting each other still being so in love and obsessed to make things work. It had been before though, before ‘the patience’ happened, before the real commitment started. The dark times. The situation had changed for the whole family though, as they weaved a new beginning from bits and pieces of the past, adding patches of present and future. The Madsens and the Prices would celebrate big this year, full stop. No bad memories on her watch. Not many at least.

Picking a gift for Joyce, Rachel thought about how much they had given her in the previous months and how much she owed them all. Giving back with her generosity was the least she could do, even if her debt in simple, human kindness was impossible to pay off. It was Chloe’s mom who insisted for Rachel to stay, not willing to hear any excuses, well aware of the complicated situation at the Long Beach mansion. The certain blue rebel didn’t even want to hear about her wife getting back to California either, ready to cut down all the suitcases with her knife in case of an argument. The deadly weapon got confiscated though, but no drastic action was needed, since making this decision didn’t cost Rachel a lot of sleepless nights, even if it upset Rose and made her father silently furious. The song of her life was played to Arcadia Bay’s rhythm now, and she wouldn’t trade it for Christmas at the beach under no circumstances. It was yet another reason why Rachel went all crazy, buying way too much. It was the only form of compensation she could think of. Except her presence. She was wanted there. Really wanted.

Strolling through Macy’s, she was checking the sweaters and blazers when somebody grabbed her waist, dragged closer, sinking them both with a scent of a freshly smoked cigarette, peppermint, cardamom and sandalwood. Pretending the gesture didn’t affect her in any means she smirked, snuck out and kept browsing carefully folded clothes, feeling very cold hands on her hips. Her ignorance got punished by an impatient kiss to her ear and a mischievous smile on her shoulder. Rachel bit her lip. She knew where it was going. Somebody had to spend an extended amount of time outside since the skin she felt on her cheek was damn frozen and a little bit rough in touch. The blue beanie was itching a little as well, so she reached behind and took it off silently agreeing to this sweet attack. That was a mistake.

She got turned around and kissed properly with cold chapped lips. This particular somebody was really longing for her presence, and there was nothing better than being missed by her own private pirate.

“Hi, stranger. I was looking for you.” Chloe purred not paying attention to a few shocked customers watching them with their jaw dropped. They were quick to forget that this place wasn’t Blackwell nor their own four walls of their room, so signs of undying affection could raise a few eyebrows. Sure, you could watch, you assholes. This beautiful blonde girl belonged to the blue pirate and she was ready to make it damn obvious to the public. Or, most likely, didn’t give a fuck who was staring. Rachel growled quietly and possessively kissed her back, not holding back either. Somebody
gasped, the other customers pretended to be busy with cashmere sweaters and three swimming suits for the price of one. The store employee, a middle-aged woman, sent them a dirty look but didn’t say a word. Bitch. “Did you buy socks and underwear for the whole family yet?”

Chloe’s hands got put under Rachel’s own coat, not with any sinister intention in mind, but to warm them up a little. This blue rebel had gotten sick twice last month and even missed a few days at school paying the price for being so careless. Serving her Advil and passing the thermometer was fun, but Chloe had a terrible tendency of complaining about everything when not feeling well, including the shape of her pillow. Sure, she was all cute and adorable, but Rachel preferred her cute, adorable, healthy and less grumpy at the same time. Warming up the frozen palms worked better than she assumed though as her girl took it as an encouragement, heating up quickly, pushing her with another kiss and almost turning over the rack heavy with clothes. This pirate was definitely not hiding her vigor and vitality ready to demolish the store if encouraged more. Rachel kept her balance and the display in place, sending everybody a charming, apologetic smile. Chloe grinned.

The store employee gave them a warning look this time.

The blonde angel giggled a bit and broke off, pretending it was just a necessary pause inspiring her to spend more money and got back to surfing through the sea of dresses, outfits, and accessories. Chloe followed her touching a few things here and there, not even trying to hide her lack of interest. Always very practical, she usually went to the store knowing exactly what she wanted, not keen on wasting time on useless browsing. Rachel, on the other hand, could spend the whole day in a store checking, measuring and staring at things she never intended to buy in the first place. The fact that her rebel hated this tedious journey was partly the reason why she decided to wander through the mall alone for a good part of the day. This and Max. It felt more natural for Rachel not to be present at the bus station, acting as the little freckle’s best buddy. At some point they would have come to some terms though, peel away the layers of the weird tension getting to the bottom of it, but Christmas eve was the worst possible time ever. So, later. Maybe next year. Maybe never. Or maybe it would get solved by itself somehow.

Max Caulfield. Damn you. Merry Christmas, but damn you.

“So, socks and underwear, huh? Do you really think that I’m lacking any kind of creativity in that department?” Rachel asked remembering the silly, blue question.

“On the contrary.” Chloe murmured grabbing an ugly shit, looking at it with her eyes wide open, and then tossing it away in disgust. “I’m just afraid of what you would come up with if it wasn’t socks and underwear. And speaking of…” She winked spotting the dressing rooms. The place looked awfully unoccupied, far away from the store guard dog. “I think I would like to measure a thing or two here…”

“A thing or two, huh? I ain’t gonna fall for it.” Rachel narrowed her eyes shrugging, still trailblazing the path through the hangers and shelves. She got stopped in a second, pulled closer. “Baby! Stop. Stop!” Her resistance got broken by her own laugh. “Chloe, no!”

“Chloe, yes!” Rachel got yanked inside, pressed against the wall and almost fell on her ass, since it wasn’t a really stable piece of construction. Somebody in the other room yelled at them as they both burst into laughter, struggling a little and playfully pushing each other. Then the blue gaze intensified, as Rachel’s white coat got zipped out and Chloe achieved the full access to the blonde neck. It didn’t get wasted. “Fuck, I missed you so much.”

The store employee cleared her throat very loudly. Her concern got entirely disregarded.

“A few moments with Max and you already missed me?” Rachel murmured taking a breath between
the kisses, ignoring the customers suddenly very interested in the displays close to the dressing room area. Giving them a free show wasn’t a holiday gift from their part, but damn, who could resist an empty stall after half a day alone. “That’s rich.”

“Yeah, I’m a clingy motherfucker, bite me.”

So, Chloe’s bottom lip got bitten. Not hard though.

“Happy to be of service.” Rachel tilted her head. “And don’t you offend my mother-in-law, baby. It’s rude. It’s…” Her voice disappeared in another impatient, deep kiss, and the blue hands wandered below the layers of shirts to touch the bare skin. Rachel hissed feeling still freezing touch but didn’t push her girl away. Somebody had to warm up this ice-covered pirate and hell, she was missing her too. The heating up process was intensifying within seconds, as the longing took over and both of them forgot about the whole world around, store code of conduct included. Just another caress, another quiet moan, just five seconds more, alright ten, the hell with time. “Chloe…” She whispered almost in a moan and threw her head back letting the stream of kisses to continue.

Then they heard a whistle. Loud, obnoxious, piercing whistle that forced them to part immediately and look around to find the source of the annoying distraction. Two guys, a little bit older than them, dressed in Oregon Ducks hoodies watched them with pure pleasure, grinning like idiots. Getting noticed didn’t change their attitude though as they felt even more welcomed, assuming that their attention got appreciated. The shorter one took one step in their direction and winked directly at Chloe.

“Nice!” He offered an opinion that no one needed.

“Santa came earlier this year!” His friend decided that an obnoxious gesture of grabbing his own genitalia was perfectly understandable and desired. “Wanna warm up my Christmas sock?”

The girls froze. The warm, fuzzy feeling of being closed in each other’s arms got replaced by a sudden, icy shock. It wasn’t the first time somebody decided to get into their business though, but it didn’t make it less uncomfortable. A dash of cold water, delivered in the least expectant moment, woke up the worst part of Rachel. Before the blue pirate had time to react, she pushed her swiftly ready to shovel all the festive lights up those guys’ asses. At once.

“Back off!” She hissed. “Don’t you fucking dare. One more fucking gesture and you will regret that you were born, you hear me?”

The guys looked at each other in surprise as they were expecting holiday wishes instead. Apparently, the compliment wasn’t appreciated. Fuck, what a dumb chick. They were just trying to be nice though and she was acting like they stopped their wedding or something. The blonde girl was ready to rip them apart just because of an innocent suggestion, the punk one seemed even more dangerous. The first dude shrugged and was prepared to walk off, but his vulgar friend stayed in place and only blinked, not sure why his invitation was met with such a harsh response.

“What did I do?” He frowned, but then they spotted the store employee who was slowly walking in their direction. The woman looked at the girls reproachfully, evidently not approving their behavior, but wouldn’t let any funny business to happen in her presence. Chloe, who was ready to jump down the guys’ throats calmed down instantly, not keen on causing any trouble. Being reckless had its limits, and she didn’t want anybody to get fired at the end of the year or get kicked out from the store for example.

Rachel was free of those concerns though.
“What the fuck? Do you really think it’s nice? Are you so fucking desperate to show who is the top dog here? I can prove very fast that it ain’t you.” Ready to throw a tantrum she lurked at her pirate, who got torn between enjoying her angel fighting on their behalf and getting livid herself. Chloe shook her head, surrounded her with her arms, hugged calmly and warning not to start any drama. A few more steps and Rachel would be close enough to push this asshole, kicking down a few racks or create an even bigger mess. It was a pleasure to listen though, so the blue rebel decided to look dangerous but silent, remaining rational and reasonable at the same time. Yeah, her. Reasonable. Funny. Christmas spirit or some shit.

The Oregon Ducks fan looked around hoping for some support, but the rest of the customers decided he became invisible or not worthy of their attention. The store lady moved closer though, but more shielding them than supporting the whistling guys, knowing who the troublemaker was here. Her piercing gaze paralyzed the dude for a few long seconds, and then both men backtracked to the exit, saving whatever was left of their dignity.

“How happy holidays!” Rachel yelled, seeing them sending some Christmas wishes with the middle finger raised.

“Dykes.” One of them murmured while leaving Macy’s.

Rachel shut her eyes tightly, feeling the steam of her upcoming inner explosion. Fuck. The name calling again. Frist at school, then online, then here. It was slowly progressing recently as the whole town dropped the grit, deciding to show their real, ugly faces. Was it really that recent though or had they not noticed it before? Annoyed as hell, she was ready to storm out as well, but got stopped again, held by the folds of her coat and then hugged. A quiet, blue reminder the she wasn’t alone. In general, and in this.

“Rach, don’t you burn down this poor shopping mall, alright?” Chloe warily adjusted the strip of her backpack taking a step back. She was all up for kicking those guys’ asses and hated when insults were flying their direction, although starting hell wouldn’t do them any good. Not to mention that her own private dragon might’ve calmed down a lot recently, playing the responsible angel now but could lose her temper quickly. Angry and humiliated, Rachel was unpredictable and only one hug away from watching the world burn down. It wasn’t a good time and place for such a retaliation though. This poor lady working here didn’t deserve staying late to clean up or getting a strike from her management. “I know it’s shit, but it’s all we have here.” She brushed the blonde hair, touched the swinging earring. “Hey, hey, you crazy lion. They’re gone, alright? It’s fine.”

“No, it is not fine.” The hazel was still burning with high flames. “It will never be fine. I’m so fucking tired of this shit.” Taking a deep breath, Rachel composed herself a little. “Oh, alright. I just don’t like when people just bother us like that. I’m sorry, but this asshole just ruined my mood a little...” She smoothed the pirate’s jacket that got a hella wrinkled in the process. “…And the moment.”

“Because of one whistle?” Rachel's chin got lifted. “Let me fix it then.” And they drowned in a long, slow kiss again, this time without that much fire, but with mild tenderness, to stifle down the blaze. No racks were pushed, and no walls hit with an impatient embrace, as Chloe knew exactly how to tame her dragon. They both smiled lightly. “Here. The dent in your day patched up.”

“Good to have a mechanic by my side.”

The store lady nodded with a quick smirk and walked off leaving them alone. Suddenly the guard dog became an ally. Women’s solidarity, picking the lesser evil or just the Christmas spirit. It didn’t matter though, Rachel could settle with any at the moment. Giving Chloe her beanie back she grabbed things already selected and paid as fast as she could, expressing the most honest happy
holiday wishes in her whole life.

“Don’t you peer inside.” Seeing that her pirate chivalrously reached for the stack of bags, she stopped her before the help got backed up with curiosity. “I have a few secrets here, and I would prefer them to keep their surprise status.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. Uh, very well, she could just carry this burden without knowing, sure.

“I thought you hate surprises.”

“I do, others don’t.” Rachel shrugged when they reached the hallway and started ambling to another store. If Chloe hoped that she caught her girl at the end of the shopping quest, she had to be damn disappointed but didn’t complain, dragging the bags without a grumble. “And I don’t necessary hate them though, just got my fair share since I hooked up with this blue-haired devil.” Realistically she didn’t mind revelations though, but the circle of people who Rachel trusted in that matter was extremely small. The president of this tiny club wrinkled her nose and glanced at her trying to carry all her belongings with one hand only.

“Am I a surprise for you?”

Their fingers laced.

“A constant one.”

They went through Barnes and Noble, inspected the first fifteen feet of Old Navy, stopped at Walgreens discussing the necessity of purchasing fancy sets of cosmetics, looked at a few things at small, independent boutiques, and almost argued during their stroll through JCPenney. Chloe couldn’t believe how easy it was for Rachel to spend hundreds of dollars on things that were nice and all, but not essential. James Amber had to send an extra fat check this Christmas, and her wife was never great with savings. She never had to though. Complaining it was too much was getting her angel angry, so she just gave up, carrying the increasing number of bags and saving the comments for herself only.

The mall marathon was damn exhausting, so they decided to stop at the food court. Eating anything just before the massive family dinner seemed like blasphemy and a massive disrespect towards Joyce’s cooking skills, so they settled with hot drinks, chatting, laughing at stupid things and trying to guess who would get what tomorrow morning. Rachel got a few texts, so she got busy with replying, mostly copy-pasting the same wishes over and over again. Chloe just stretched her legs enjoying the moment of calm and hoping the spending money journey would come to its end soon. This mall was super small last time she checked, now it grew to some monstrous size, sucking out every ounce of her carefully saved energy. Hell, she was done. Like really.

“Hey, isn’t that Juliet?” The blue pirate almost choked on her hot chocolate pointing at the small figure walking fast on the other side of the hallway. “Hey, Juliet!” She yelled, but the shadow of their Blackwell friend apparently tried very hard not to notice them. Chloe frowned, forgetting about her weariness. “Strange.”

Rachel leaned on the table, stirring her black coffee with a plastic spoon and looking at the mentioned direction. Her girl wasn’t wrong though, it had to be her drama club colleague, but even shopping haste wouldn’t explain Juliet’s super-fast trot and an apparent attempt not to notice them. She might be a good actress, but it was impossible not to see yelling Chloe. Well, happy holidays to you too. On the other hand, maybe it was a last-minute trip before jumping on the plane and getting back to Florida where Juliet’s family was living, or she was rushing for a meeting or searching for someone. Something was telling Rachel that it was more than just haste though. This girl stopped
responding to messages, was more a guest than a student at Blackwell and previously very active among students, shut everybody down, cutting all the ties.

“Yeah, she’s been acting off since like… Last month.” Rachel murmured watching Juliet disappearing between the waves of people. “Frist dropping out of the play, avoiding everybody, then this.”

“Do you think it’s personal?” Chloe asked cautiously. The atmosphere at school wasn’t very merciful towards them lately and a lot of supposed colleagues changed into ignorant assholes or evident enemies. Well, some dickheads started early with the New Year’s resolutions. Personal goal number one, ignore your gay friend. Thanks, Blackwell. It seemed unlikely for Juliet to be part of this nasty group though. She had never been the type.

The hazel eyes narrowed.

“I really hope not.”

After coffee, their expedition through “Arcadia mall” was officially over. Chloe got a text message from Joyce asking them politely where the hell they were and urging to get back home. Their contribution to the preparations was more than needed and they were ordered to take part in it without a complaint as soon as possible. To her pirate’s surprise, Rachel expressed a significant amount of enthusiasm toward this part, but the Ambers didn’t really organize much for this holiday, preferring to rely on the help of the others or simply traveling to some expensive hotels instead. Well, first regular middleclass, blue-collar Christmas. Chloe sighed knowing this whole ritual with cooking, cleaning, dusting, and yelling wasn’t as alluring as her girl presumed, always heavy with tension and unrealistic expectations for the house to look perfect. Nothing was perfect enough for Joyce though, so she was shrieking and cursing, ordering everybody around, exhausting herself and even crying from time to time. The blue rebel usually tried to hide in her room or even camped out at the junkyard, helping only when it was literally impossible to refuse. Even David, used to the military drill, was avoiding Joyce finding something extremely urgent to fix or paint instead. Apparently, her wife found this whole shit thrilling. Arguing with her mother and enlightening Rachel about the potential hazards at the same time was beyond Chloe’s limits.

Fine. Home then. Great. She would have to do laundry. And vacuum. Oh, Christ.

They smoked, reaching Walmart parking lot, usually hella empty but now crammed with the sea of cars, mostly in dusty and grey-ugly colors, as nature made them, not the factory. There was nothing shiny and glorious about the back of the mall, even if the front had been exquisitely changed. Trying to locate the truck, they argued a bit again finally agreeing to the pirate’s sense of direction. Chloe started to get snappy as the number of bags in her hands escalated recently, and the only thing she wished for was to toss them all at the back of the old rusty.

While passing one of the mall’s corners, they noticed one of the most famous of Arcadia Bay’s residents who, covered in blankets and comforters, tried to hoard all the warmth left and was feeding on leftovers of some fast food meal. This holy time wasn’t generous for the homeless lady, who didn’t find any proper shelter and was about to spend her Christmas between the trash can and the metal fence. Chloe stopped first, throwing away her smoke and looked at the bags thinking if they could spare some of the wealth. It would be nice to make the homeless woman’s holiday somehow special, share the joy and maybe give away some of the things that weren’t indispensable. Rachel sighed, nodded and pointed at one of the bags, containing a few tin boxes of shortbread and a very cute, adorable set of woolen gloves. It wasn’t bought for anybody in particular though but as a result of a special offer that she couldn’t resist.

Special offer indeed.
“Here you are.” Chloe boldly took a few steps handing the woman the whole thing. “Happy holidays!” Handing her the bag felt awkward, as a show off of the pirate’s own contentment, so she backed off quickly not knowing what to do with her hands. Pockets. Thank God for the pockets.

Rachel grabbed her arm amused by the blue shyness.

The homeless lady looked at them in surprise, more used to pranks and cruel jokes than actual presents, and then lurked inside in pure, genuine amazement. The gloves were put to use instantly, and the tin can was opened shortly after. Tongue-tied and nervous, Chloe wanted to walk away but got stopped. Rachel smiled, way more used to charity than her own wife. Her girl was right though. It was the right thing to do. Nice job. And it was Chloe who thought about it first, not her. Damn it.

“Oh, thank you!” The woman shook her head in disbelief, digging in the bag and discovering new treasures. And they said the debit card couldn’t bring you happiness. “God bless you. God bless you two. Oh, I remember you.” She sniffed looking at Chloe. “Your mother works at Two Whales, doesn’t she?” The pirate nodded. “Such a nice and kind lady. Always taking care of others.”

“She got it after her.” Rachel tapped her girl’s arm.

The woman closed her eyes enjoying the taste of shortbread as if recalling lovely, cheerful memories of a less unkind Christmas. Obviously very hungry, she was eating carefully not wasting a single crumble of the sweet surprise. It was truly a generous gift though. She didn’t remember when somebody offered her anything that wasn’t just a leftover or garbage.

“Maybe. Or after you.” A woolen glove pointed at Rachel. The woman made herself more comfortable, and presented a mysterious, happy, almost toothless smile. “My mother, God rest her soul, was always sayin’ kindness has to be awarded, or it would vanish like smoke in the air. I can’t give you anything you don’t have, so let me tell’ya something. I know this place, and I know it good. I’m old, way older than you might think, and I know what kind of force keeps this town alive. I’ve seen the powerful storms and mighty earthquakes. I’ve been walking through the misty forests and crawled through parched deserts. I’ve seen glory and disaster…”

“Everything that the beaver state has to offer.” Chloe sighed deeply, regretting that they hadn’t walked away in time. The homeless woman was always nice and kinda cool, but also bat-shit crazy and her rants could take forever. Not an alluring perspective, with an angry mother waiting at home and a chilly breeze freezing them to the bone.

A few crumbles fell on the cold, ice-covered sidewalk.

“I know you think I’m crazy and maybe I am but let me tell’ya something.” The woman finished eating, carefully stashing the rest of the treat between her belongings. “It ain’t gonna be easy. The bay will call for ya. It will try to summon you…” The black stumps of teeth flashed in a wild, broad grin. “…Summon you inside.”

Rachel felt a sharp, hot shiver running through her spine. The parking lot got smaller, like the corners of the shopping mall wrapped around them in a command or a secret spell. The breeze became colder, sharper, more piercing and intense. The homeless lady giggled and dusted off her blanket, still grinning. The crumbles of short bread were still visible in the corners of her trembling lips. Those words felt familiar. Too familiar, as if Rachel had heard them in another life or experienced a weird, ominous déjà vu. She squeezed Chloe’s hand, but her blue treasure didn’t seem affected in any way. Just a crazy talk, right?

“Inside of what?” Rachel whispered.

“Of itself.” The old, wise, tired eyes observed her very carefully. “Be careful who you whisper to.
Whispers can be more dangerous than screams since no one can hear them. No relief will be offered, no helpful hand will appear. Except for one, that you will reject anyway. You two…” She sighed. “You two have something special. Do not waste it, will’ya? Do not change it into dust. It will be tempting, oh, so tempting, but you remember to stick together. Always together.” The homeless woman shifted in her seat a little, closing her eyes and hiding in her own private world. Then she shrugged rapidly waking up and waved her hand. “Alright, enough then. Do not listen to me too much. It’s a holy time and may all your dreams come true, girls. But only your dreams, not your nightmares.”

“Thank you,” said Rachel and they walked off quickly, both grateful to be done with this extraordinary lecture. Chloe pulled her closer, still speechless and keener on getting back home than ten minutes before. Born and raised by Arcadia Bay she should’ve been immune, but the supposed warning was still resonating in her head and tying her stomach into one big, aching knot. It was just a cracked talk tough. No reason to be stressed about it. If they were stoned, they would trip so high right now. Thankfully the weed wasn’t part of their diet anymore. “That was strange.” She heard her blonde angel murmuring.

“It’s Arcadia Bay during the winter solstice.” The blue pirate kissed her forehead. “This lady should sign up for one of those TV jobs and read tarot cards or something. She would make millions with this shit. Don’t worry, she is just cray-cray a bit. It’s fine.”

“It is.” Rachel snuggled into her arms and stayed there until the weird shivers passed and her mind got sidetracked by something less strange. The sight of the black, eerie grin was haunting her every time she closed her eyes though.

Finding the car was more complicated than they thought, as Chloe’s intuition failed her completely forcing them both to wander around the parking lot twice. Rachel didn’t even roll her eyes this time, following her pirate who was close to just stealing any vehicle, only to be done with the search. At some point, they noticed the infamous Oregon Ducks’ fans that bothered them at the store, but Chloe was too tired to start another fight. Rachel granted them mercy as well, still moved by the homeless woman’s words and generously ignoring their existence. Happy holidays to you too. Her day got weird enough, burning down hundreds of cars wouldn’t make it better. The guys kept their distance though. Good. The open space in front of Walmart wasn’t a good choice for a battleground anyway. At the store, it would be just a fight. Here, they could end up with murder charges or something.

They located the truck shortly after.

Coming back home seemed like jumping into the washing machine during the highest spinning moment. Jumping off the car, they bumped into David struggling with a tall, shapely pine, which, as he admitted proudly, was selected and cut down by him and himself only. Thinning the Oregon forest was obviously easier than dragging its remains inside, so they rushed to help him and after long minutes of snorting, slipping and cursing, placed the damn tree in the living room, just by the fireplace. Joyce, who already finished cleaning, forced them to sweep the floor, covered by hundreds of pine needles and didn’t want to hear Chloe’s rational explanation that it didn’t matter or could be done later.

“There is no ‘later,’ Chloe.” She commanded, giving Rachel a different set of tasks around the kitchen, from washing the dishes to slicing the onions. “‘Later’ means next year, I know you.” And off her daughter went, ready to find the broom without a word of objection.

This whole marriage thing was more beneficial than Joyce had predicted.

When Chloe was cleaning something already freaking clean, her girl became a kitchen slave, trying to keep up with all the orders and following the instructions. Well, good luck. It was impossible,
even for Rachel previously Amber the great. Judging by the amount of food being prepared they expected a whole regiment of guests to join them tomorrow, but she didn’t complain, hoping to be as helpful as her lack of expertise in that matter let her. Sure, she didn’t burn everything she tried to cook and knew her way around a blender, but in Joyce’s eyes was still an amateur who had to be instructed about every single thing.

“I told you.” The blue pirate warned her with a big grin when they accidentally met and stole a quick kiss in the hallway.

“Shut up,” Rachel answered, still enjoying the hard work but wondering how long they could go without a short break or a time for a smoke. It seemed like Joyce, usually pretty laid back and patient, decided to turn the whole household into Two Whales dinner, with tons of customers to feed in an enormous speed. She tried to keep up with the pace, but it was practically impossible as everything had to be done in a certain way at particular promptness, put back in a well-known place and messing with an already established order was strictly prohibited. Rachel could dream to obtain those kinds of talents at some point in her life, maybe twenty years from now, and even if keen to learn and ask the right questions, was slowing Joyce down. Chloe’s mom expressed way more endurance towards her than the rest of her family but scoffed a few times regardless or simply took over asking the blonde angel to do something else. Like nothing. She really appreciated the help though, it felt good and promising that Rachel wanted to learn a few practical things, but maybe later. Like next year or something. Or never.

The break in some form came not that much after when Joyce ordered them to trim the tree, probably annoyed by too many distractions and preferring to hustle around the kitchen alone. Rachel didn’t mind switching though, entirely supported by her own blue rebel, who strived for her company, even if it meant opening dusty boxes and untying loads of cables. They dealt with the task astonishingly fast as not many lights and ornaments were saved from previous years. Chloe murmured something about not even having a Christmas tree for some time, reminding Rachel how sad those holidays had had to be and how much she fucked up not making it better. They hugged for a moment, holding each other tightly, and parted before instructed that it wasn’t the right time to cuddle. Alright, the tree. Putting all that shiny stuff there was more fun that Chloe remembered, and even David helped a bit, but not much, aware that decorating anything wasn’t his strong suit.

When called, Joyce left her kitchen corner to judge their effort, and everybody held their breaths waiting for the verdict. There was no question who was in charge here and had the power of evaluation. Chloe’s mother could be very understanding and supportive, not forcing her way on things, but Christmas’ eve was like a fool moon for a werewolf for her. No mercy for the poorly hung glass balls.

“I think we need more.” She scrutinized the tree critically with her arms akimbo. “It’s not enough. Chloe, please bring the orange box from the attic, it should be on the right between suitcases. You know which one.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus, please, no.” The usually witty pirate groaned, growing a little bit pale. “Not the orange box.” She started to rub her hands in a nervous manner, looking left and right in a panic, just like before an important exam or awaiting a severe scolding.

“No discussion, Chloe.”

“What?” Rachel frowned. “What’s wrong with it? Do you want this poor pine to be naked or something?”

“But the orange box?” Came the blue murmur.
With a question mark above her head, Rachel looked at her wife, then Joyce, then back at Chloe hoping for insight, or even a hint about what this mysterious, orange box was. David just shrugged, pretending to be terribly busy dusting the already clean TV and hoping not to be involved or asked for an opinion. It was better not to have one at the moment. Mother and daughter were going through a silent fight though, not willing to share any details, both determined and persistent to stand their ground. Joyce slowly tilted her head, showing that this subject was not up for debate. The blue rebel, miserably trying to remain stubborn, begged her mom silently to withdraw the order. Rachel opened her arms, still in the dark, not sure if it was a family thing, or if she had no idea about some critical American Christmas tradition that her parents never introduced her to.

“That’s where I kept all the decorations Chloe made in kindergarten,” said Joyce finally still watching her daughter, who was wriggling as her glare was burning her alive. “Maybe they are not very glorious or handcrafted like those from Hallmark, but they are very special. We didn’t have that giant of a tree for years, so there was no need to bring them back, but since we are celebrating big this year…”

“I can get some glass balls from the store nearby.” The blue terror waved her hands ready to run to her truck in her socks if only that would help save her dignity. “Everybody is selling them like crazy, mom.”

Joyce shook her head, as humiliating her own daughter was part of the agenda and couldn’t be void or postponed. To be frank, seeing Chloe so nervous almost made her laugh, but had to put up a mask of a serious and demanding mother, otherwise the orange box would forever stay upstairs collecting more dust. Rachel looked at Joyce, not even slightly deceived that the old, handmade ornaments were an important and vital part of decorating the tree. They could easily manage without any additional ones or just rearrange the setting a little. Chloe’s mom asked for the attic trip for one purpose only though. It was a Christmas gift to her daughter’s wife to show a little bit of the past, give her a sense of how the holiday was celebrated before the girls even knew about each other’s existence and welcomed her into the family one more time. Hiding how moved she was, Rachel crossed her arms on her chest and bowed her head, aware that it was her turn to take a stance, and she was in no place to support her girl. Oh, damn it.

“C’mon baby, are you ashamed of your own art?” She chuckled.

“Trust me, it’s everything but art. What?” Chloe spread her arms widely, stunned at how quiet the room had become. Why was everybody looking at her like that? “It’s embarrassing. It would be awkward for you too.”

A loud crack broke the silence as a beer can popped open in David’s hand. Watching a game required a good treat, and he wouldn’t miss an opportunity to relax before the new assignment. Joyce didn’t even waste a second to scold him though.

“Not really.” Rachel shook her head clearing her throat. “My parents never put anything on the Christmas tree that didn’t cost at least twenty bucks and didn’t fit the theme. Fancy things only, so our living room always looked like an expensive movie set. Perhaps my mom saved some of my drawings or Christmas cards I was making for the family though.” Those silly sketches were probably the only personal memories still preserved. Rachel’s family had never collected any of her enthusiastic doodles nor stash them in the orange boxes. “I promise I will embarrass myself during the next possible opportunity.”

“Promise?” It was a playful smile the blue pirate couldn’t resist.

“Uh-huh.” Rachel nodded. “And I would really like to see the craft of little Chloe since I’m pretty familiar with the skills of the older one.” Kissing her girl in front of Joyce and David didn’t happen
very often, as she always found it a bit uncomfortable, knowing that this feeling was pretty much mutual. Now it seemed expected though, so she summoned Chloe’s lips closer with a quick, shy gesture and closed her eyes hoping that the parents wouldn’t mind.

They did not. Neither did her rebel, however she didn’t push for more than just one quick peck.

“Fine, you won. Why do you always have to win?” Chloe scoffed, turned around and walked towards the stairs, still a bit cranky. One kiss and she was really looking forward to putting this ridiculous shit on the poor tree. Fuck you, Rachel. “Attic, here I come.”

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“I hoped we will see each other this year.” Her father’s voice was hoarse and shaking, his throat clenched, but he managed to remain strict and formal. James Amber was usually very effective hiding any kind of disappointments but didn’t take well the fact that after all the family had gone through last year, his daughter decided to stay in Oregon. It was an additional, unfair punch, a slap to his face that he didn’t deserve after going all the nine yards bending his rules to Rachel’s liking. It seemed like a crossed line, a string pulled too much, and the worst part was that his daughter was aware of it.

Perfectly aware.

The snow crackled under her steps as she sauntered toward the backyard fence, grasping on the phone firmly. Even when outside she could still smell the compelling mixture of gingerbread, cumin, and freshly baked cake. It would be nice to get back, surrounding herself with all the pots’ clatter, a loud yell of a vacuum cleaner and nervous steps back and forth in the stairs, but she postponed this conversation long enough. Her parents felt punished though, disregarded, thrown away and it was unmanageable to ensure them otherwise. She hurt them. Again. Another decision heavy with consequences. Could she say it was unintentional even if she knew how much they would suffer? Talking to her father was always a hardship, and Rachel still couldn’t find the right tone, balancing between being humble and defensive, indifferent and engaged, making them both uncomfortable, to put it mildly.

“Maybe we could visit after New Year.” She lied swiftly, taking a deep drag of smoke. The snow cracked when she tried to step silently, playing one of her favorite childhood games not to make a sound when walking through the white, frozen cotton. Good practice regarding this conversation though. Crack. Step. Crack. And then she stumbled upon some old shovel making a shitload of noise, and nothing was careful anymore. This phone call started off poorly anyway with Rose first sniffling, then crying openly repeating how much she misses her little angel and now her father was giving her a more extensive guilt trip. Divine. They had been there though, it was already discussed like fifteen times why Rachel wanted to stay in Arcadia, but she might as well talk to a wall or this wooden fence for example. Or the shovel. She kicked the useless, rusted piece of tool giving up with the game of silence.

He chuckled but decide to play along with the lines.

“We would indeed appreciate it, Rachel. Your mother and I miss you greatly and would gladly welcome you both here.” The pause before the word ‘both’ was almost non-existent this time. Good, they were making progress. “Or, if you prefer, we could go for a trip, as we did when you were younger.” His tone cheered up a little. “Colorado is beautiful this time of the year.” Suggesting a
neutral ground was not a bad idea but it seemed more like a negotiation than a family reunion.


Colorado could be delightful, sure. So was Arcadia, especially the blue-haired, pirate version of this town frozen in time, but she didn’t have the guts to say it. There was no reason to mention Chloe in every single sentence, throwing her name in his face repeatedly and making her stance annoyingly immature and childish. She was a freaking adult now, or she tried to be at least, spending this time away from mommy and daddy, under a different roof and eating from a different table. Should. Must. Behave. More fucking obligations, more lines to cross-jump, more convoluted states of hush-hush. Chloe wasn’t even an issue anymore though. They did understand it, they got it finally in this weird formal and cold way, but the warm acceptance wasn’t even blinking on the horizon. Slow steps on thin ice were the only way out. Little by little. Being an adult. Crack. Disappointing them. Crack. Her mom crying. Crack. The white surface got marked by dark, deep holes of her own footsteps, showing the remains of dead, frozen grass at the bottom. Crack.

She turned around and walked back on her own traces.

“Thank you, dad. We will consider it, although the beginning of senior year might be quite busy.” Finding a believable excuse had never been easier. Rachel inhaled noticing that the cig was burnt out almost to the filter. “Too busy for an extended vacation.”

“Ah, I understand.” James’s voice got softer, and this time his joyfulness wasn’t forged. “My congratulations on your application to Harvard though. I have to say I’m very impressed by your academic achievements and plans for the future.”

Rachel looked at the path in the snow, holes filled with nothing, creating a chaotic pattern around the backyard. From the door to the fence, around the old swing, and then a hectic mess in the middle. Cold. Crack. She felt cold inside. And then the inner frost intensified when she got hit by a recollection of the homeless woman’s words, this odd prophecy that was still resonating in the back of her head. Whispers are more dangerous than screams, she had been told. Should she yell then? Would that help?

“Nothing came out of it yet,” she whispered.

James cleared his throat.

“I’m sure it will, Rachel. You always get what you want, don’t you?”

Don’t you?

They finished the phone call chatting about less sensitive topics, mostly focusing on her parents’ daily life; therefore, Rachel learned about all her father’s newest achievements, including clients, cases and bringing justice for people who paid well. She liked law, but every time James was talking about his work, she started hating it with every fiber of her being. Maybe she should just pursue her career in acting or become a model, instead of trying to impress her parents without impressing herself. The final, ending click was a relief, mixed with dejection, a scent of gingerbread, cumin, and freshly baked cake. Two worlds stopped colliding. Thank God.

She missed them though. Could you miss somebody and be grateful that you didn’t have to hear their voice anymore? Her rift with her father went so far that it was impossible to patch it up or she didn’t
even know how, so just going with the flow and staying afloat not making things worse was the only option. James Amber wasn’t making it easier either.

Still recovering after the discussion, Rachel didn’t notice Chloe first lurking outside to check if the phone call was still ongoing, then opening the door and walking to her slowly. Crack, crack. Fast.

It sounded like knocking.

“Can I kidnap you now, or you’re still busy?”

“All yours now.” Rachel’s phone disappeared into her pocket. She smiled, happy for a distraction.

“Any particular reason why you want to kidnap me?”

The blue pirate wrinkled her nose and scratched her cheek. Frankly, she just missed their time alone, but expressing her longing twice a day would present her as a sad, anxious koala, damaging her rebel image beyond repair. Not that she really needed to keep her guard up so often, being an open book most of the time. This whole mushy family stuff played on her nerves though, and Chloe was still unsure how she felt about the fact that Rachel found her way around the holiday mess so quickly. Faster than Joyce’s daughter.

“Do I need to have a reason?” And then she remembered the contents of the orange box that proudly changed their status from forgotten pieces of shit to decorations. Rachel had way too much fun, commenting on every single item. Worse, she had fun with Joyce and David together. What a betrayal. “I have to hold you hostage after seeing this stupid crap I was forced to put on the tree. No one can learn about it. No one.” She warned with a low, growling voice.

“Hostage, huh?” Rachel grinned widely. “That was actually cute…” A snowball hit her in the head, stifling the rest of the sweet confession. “Hey! That wasn’t fair!” She yelled, shaking off the white powder.

Crack. Crack. Chloe took two steps back and winked.

“Life is not always fair, Rach, but you can take your revenge if you want to. I know it’s not as alluring as burning down the whole shopping center but…” And a snowball to her face made her speechless and stunned for a split second.

“You are so dead.” Rachel was already on her knees preparing another snow missile. Shaking off the frozen scraps, Chloe wiped the snowflakes off her face and followed her girl, ready to build her own fortification and gather more ammo. A joke became a battle. Very well then, she could present her war craft in its full glory.

“How dead?”

“How dead.”

Huffing and puffing, making and throwing snowballs, they chased each other for a long while. At first, it was just a prank to break the post-phone call tension, then it became a competition that Chloe was slowly losing. The blue pirate, more like a blue snowman at the moment, had to admit that she’d gotten pretty rusty in that kind of combat and even being stubborn and defensive wasn’t enough to face Rachel’s rage. She had no idea that snowballs could be thrown with the same fierce enthusiasm as burning the national forest. Her girl was able to express her fire even at sub-zero temperature.

Trying to avoid yet another humiliating defeat, Chloe jumped on her, tripping over some rusty garden tool, and knocked Rachel down, making them both fall on the ground. Her girl screamed not expecting this bold plot-twist but didn’t plan to surrender even if a kiss or two were stolen in the
process. They rolled in the snow for a while, laughing and giggling like crazy, but when tickling got into play, the blue pirate officially gave up, being straddled by her own personal ice dragon.


She was never more charming and more beautiful, or memory failed the blue rebel once again. Feeling her clothes slowly getting wet, Chloe wondered who actually swept who off their feet this time, because she got lost in this hazel gaze so much she forgot how to breathe. A wicked idea, considering the fact that her girl was on top of her, nailing her blue treasure to the frozen lawn. Rachel, still panting after the snowball battle, was watching her closely inches away from a kiss, with her lips half open. Her victory had never been sweeter, but it got forgotten in the blink of an eye. She got so distracted by this rebellious smile, that all the pressing questions, problems, and issues got entirely buried down in a pile of snow and her own amazement. Rachel leaned in for a proper kiss but got stopped with a whisper.

“Do not unpack before tomorrow.”

“I will try but…” She couldn’t stop looking at Chloe even for the sake of a kiss. “…I’m not sure if the gift resists the temptation to remain being wrapped up.”

“The gift will try but I’m not sure if the other one will be so untouched.” Her first intent was to rub more snow into the blonde hair, but Chloe took off her gloves and touched Rachel’s cheek instead, trying to warm it up. The skin got a little bit rough, somebody had to warm up this little blonde angel. It was too cold for them to fly alone. “We can bend the rules a little.” She suggested bravely.

“You don’t want to keep up with the tradition?” Rachel tilted her head. “What kind of monster are you?”

She got rolled over and kissed hard. Crack. Crack. Storm of cracks.

“The special kind. Yours,” said Chloe helping her to get up and then leading to the old swing. Offering Rachel a seat, she reached behind the rusty grill, now covered with a fluffy white comforter, getting two glasses and a bottle of something that wasn’t milk or tea. “And speaking of breaking rules, I have one of those things you hate…”

“Captain Crunch banana shake?” Rachel responded, trying to enslave the mess her hair had become.

“No, a surprise. With some extra spice, but don’t tell David.” The blue pirate peered at the door to make sure that her parents weren’t up for a sudden visitation to the backyard anytime soon and filled the glasses smoothly. They didn’t even need ice though. One good thing about this weather.

Rachel’s chest tightened a bit with a sudden realization that Chloe was hiding alcohol at her childhood playground. She really hoped it was just a one-time thing though, not a pirate’s top-secret hoard or a common mischief. Goddamnit. It was fucking uncomfortable even to suspect her girl of such a thing and imagining that she was sneaking out to get a gulp or two from time to time made Rachel feel worse. Her pirate rarely touched booze lately though, so she shook off the inner squeak of worry and accepted the glass.

Crack.

“Are we celebrating something?” She asked watching Chloe closely.

“Maybe.” The glasses met in a sharp, quick clang and the blue thief sat on the other swing taking a long sip. Alcohol quickly changed her throat from a scratchy, dry canyon to a burning river. The
sudden switch cost her a short, violent shiver. “I’m not sure if you’re aware but this is our first Christmas together. Officially.” Sip. “Fully first.” Another sip followed by a charming, teasing smile. “Worth a shot of stolen whiskey.” Initially, Chloe wanted to wait for the evening for them to raise glasses but knew from experience that they would both welcome nightfall cuddling comfortably on the couch by the fireplace, not willing to sneak out outside. A toast under the stars got postponed till the summer then. Fine for her, she wasn’t a winter person anyway.

“Well, we’ve never really had the opportunity.” Rachel winced finishing her treat, not used to drinking whiskey straight up. Not recently anyway. Christmas was usually a horrible and painful time for them, not only because of Chloe’s mood swings and her grief escalating, but by obligations to their families that had kept them separated and lonelier. There was nothing more tragic that being so young and in love and being forced to celebrate holidays with a smile when the only thing Rachel wanted was to experience it with this one blue trouble. Their first year together was particularly hurtful, and James had to confiscate her phone, as she was addicted to sending text after text to her then-girlfriend, instead of embracing the festive atmosphere. Not surprisingly, it had ended up in a huge fight. So many things had changed, and her tendency to clash with her father remained untouched, even if the arguments changed their flavors and weight.

And taste.

“And now we don’t have any other option.” Their knees met with a soft sway of the swings. Chloe emptied the glass as well, stood up and hid the rest of the liquid crime behind the grill, digging a new hole in the snow. Rachel watched the bottle disappear with a very grim and careful look on her face. Her pirate first pretended she did not notice, but then shook her head. “What?” She scoffed after a dull moment of intense silence.

“Just wondering...” Rachel swung higher to cover her fluster. It felt so wrong to even doubt her wife, but it would be worse to pretend that it was fine. “You know... is that your secret booze stash or something?”

Chloe turned back to her, eating up a bitter smirk and clenching her teeth. Hard. The accusation, no, actually just a small suggestion hurt more than she would’ve expected and, to be honest, she never assumed that Rachel would link this one drink to her previous troubles.

Fuck it.

“Ah, if that’s what’s on your mind, you can stop worrying. I took it from David’s locker, and I will put it back there tonight when he is not around. I just wanted to get a shot with you, have a nice drink or whatever, not to...”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t.” Rachel cut her off, jumping off the swing. Being honest sucked big time. How Chloe managed to be an open book the whole fucking time was beyond her. “I’m getting better at ruining the mood, ain’t I?”

Her girl shrugged.

“It’s ok.” But it wasn’t. Rachel didn’t shun liquor out of their lives as brutally as she did with weed or other vices but was always pretty nervous when a decent bottle appeared around. It started to get annoying, especially that Chloe knew her limits, never got wasted as much as years prior and kept this shit under control. Not under Rachel’s control, and that was possibly the core of the problem.

Joyce peered from the window and waved at them urgently, saving from another clash or long discussion. The break was officially over, her kids, as she liked to refer to them, took enough time devastating the lawn and should get back to work, before doing something more stupid. Chloe
sighed deeply, ready to face another challenge in the form of an order. What would it be this time? Her bet was on dusting the stairs, but her mother could be more severe forcing them to clean the windows. Why would this house have so many windows? Who needed them?

“Baby…” The sleeve of the blue jacket got pulled lightly. “Do you still have Sera’s number on your phone?”

“Yeah.” Rachel’s biological mother wasn’t mentioned for weeks now like she stopped existing, and, as far as the blue rebel knew, her girl never contacted her again. This talk that they had was hella exhausting and fucking tense, no one really wanted to go through this again. Well, Christmastime pushed people to do weird things though. Like dusting. Or window cleaning. She tossed Rachel her mobile without hesitation “Why don’t you just put the number on yours?”

Not shockingly, her wife knew the pin number since it was her own birthday. Chloe didn’t approve of a lot of things when it came to James Amber, but they both could agree that 0722 was a perfect passcode.

“I don’t know about giving my contact info. Just… I don’t want to.” Rachel murmured swiping through the screen. Sera’s number was still in the truck, buried in the glove compartment untouched since day one. Safe and forgotten. “Yet. And this gives me an opportunity to check who you flirt with.”

Joyce gesticulated at them again, so Chloe went through a calm discussion with her mother trying to signal that they needed a bit more time. The signals became more urgent and frantic, changing into an angry version of a pantomime that no one could make sense of. Agitated and irritated, Joyce gave up first, disappearing into the depth of the house. The blue pirate groaned, aware that her mother wouldn’t let go off it. Holiday time. What a blast.

“Yeah, well Megan Fox hasn’t gotten back to me lately.” She turned back to Rachel who was typing something, stopping, deleting and typing again. “I don’t know what’s wrong. She was so all over me during this Hollywood orgy, and now she doesn’t even call.”

“That’s so presumptuous of her. Trust me, if Megan Fox was about to get back to you, she would. Thank God she doesn’t know about your existence. Alright, done.” Rachel dusted off her pants and gave Chloe the device back, ready to come back inside. The whiskey was still burning her inside but in a nice cozy and warm way. It helped a lot, particularly regarding the kind of official message she just sent to her mother. Damn, finding the accurate attitude was even harder than with James.

Chloe weighed the phone in her head for a while.

“Should I call your father?” She asked unsurely. “I mean, you know, family is family, right?”

Rachel stared at her for a second, rubbing her red, frozen palms. Family. Chloe just called her father family, considering James Amber somebody who she was related to. Jesus fucking Christ.

“Right.” She replied very, very slowly. Her girl having another conversation with her dad didn’t seem like a particularly great idea though. It could go so badly and so well at the same time, but it would be rude not to try, considering the effort he made to invite them for some crazy expensive trip. What happened to those no fucks given? What happened to the free spirit and stuff? “Up to you. I think… Rose would really appreciate that.”

The blue pirate got the hint. Rachel’s mom was a safe bet, she kinda liked the lady since no bad blood was between them and James’s wife was way easier to talk to than the famous and offish DA. To be frank, Chloe would prefer to spare herself the trouble calling the Ambers, but it seemed like
something she must do, as a consequence of winning Rachel’s presence here. Like a responsible thing. A trade. James liked trading.

Thankfully, she already had her liquid courage shot.

“All right, I will gossip with mom a little and try to drag some embarrassing details.” She looked at Rachel who was still waiting by her side expecting to be a witness of this awkward chit-chat. “Uh, no, sunshine. I want to talk to your other mother alone.”

“You just afraid to blush and stutter in front of me.”

“Me?” The blue trouble felt deeply offended. “I don’t blush and stutter.”

“We will see about that. Later.” The snow under Rachel’s steps cracked timidly as she turned around and walked towards the entrance. “Enjoy the talk, Chloe. Thank you.” She added, opening the squeaky door and vanishing inside.

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“Yes, I remember you, Victoria. It’s surprising that…” Samantha was speaking annoyingly slow, with her voice shaken as if not sure on whether they were really talking or if it was some kind of dream. Regarding their previous interaction, it seemed more like a nightmare though. “… That you decided to wish me happy holidays… Right now. After like three years.”

Victoria Chase moved impatiently, trying to nest in her seat, and when it didn’t bring an anticipated result, she got up and started walking around the living room, trying to compose herself. It took her a good hour to ultimately make this call, as she was going through all the pros and cons in her head thinking if it was really a necessary step. All the evidence was there though, all proofs she could ask for. Discussing the old, forgotten case with the victim herself seemed cruel and pointless but she had to try. Since she learned about Samantha’s past through the stolen records, Victoria couldn’t help but hope that the reports were forged and used against the Prescott family to get some money out. Moreover, she wanted them to be phony and some kind of blackmail attempt, but deep down she knew it wasn’t the case.

Samantha’s voice suddenly made the whole thing real. Not just a few paragraphs with names, numbers and photos. It was happening, and Victoria was about to ask how and why. Her palms, now sweaty and sticky, were staining the pink velvet cover of her phone. Thankfully, those cases weren’t that expensive. She could order another one tonight, no problem.

The flood of Christmas lights was blinding her through the wide and tall windows. She peered quickly outside, watching the crumbs of people rushing through the steep streets of Seattle’s waterfront overloaded with bags, carriers, and baskets, chatting and motioning, running and giggling. Hooting peasants. Luckily, the glass was thick and shielded her from the exasperating, constant murmur of the rabble, making her parents’ apartment nice and quiet. Isolated.

Steps of high heels echoed loudly on the marble tiles.

“Almost four to be exact.” She corrected Samantha and continued with studied, sympathetic tone. “What can I say, I found your number in my old notepad, and I thought that Christmas would be the perfect opportunity to touch base and ask how is everything.” They both knew it was a far-fetched story. Samantha’s parents had moved several times in the past few years and obtaining the
information about their actual residency wasn’t stress-free. Making sure that their daughter was still living with them wasn’t easy either.

“Fine. Well.” The girl sounded unsure, overwhelmed by the person she was speaking to, ignoring the lie about the notepad. Her responses were choppy, words half-eaten, breath imbalanced. As far as she remembered, Victoria Chase didn’t talk to anybody if she didn’t have any secret agenda or vicious prank prepared. People changed though, so she decided to give her former colleague a careful benefit of a doubt. “Fine. How is Blackwell? And everybody there?” She asked more of the sake of courtesy than real interest, and partly because she didn’t know what to say.

She never knew what to say.

“You mean Nathan?”

“I don’t mean Nathan.” Came the sharp answer.

The Blackwell queen bit her lip and started playing with her golden necklace, her fingers pulling the strings tensely in rapid, fast moves. Apparently, the whole drama still wasn’t forgotten, and the girl held a grudge against young Prescott. Victoria couldn’t blame her, she would destroy this motherfucker if he went that far. She would slowly peel away the layers of his shaken self-esteem, exposing all his weaknesses to others, stripping from the comfort zone in a supposedly unintentional manner to the point that he would prefer to jump out of the train called the Vortex club or even erasing himself from society all together. She was good at destroying people and so far, she failed only in one case. It would be easy to ruin him though, astonishingly simple.

If that was true. If it happened to her. If.

“It’s going ok,” she answered. “Most people are in college right now except a few, like Rachel Amber and Chloe Price, if you remember them.” The idea of informing Samantha about their pathetic marriage was tempting, but she didn’t want to sidetrack the conversation into a gossiping territory. Already uncomfortable, she wanted to finish this talk before it even started so one small comment had to suffice.

“I do. Chloe was weird. Rachel was… Rachel.”

Well said. Victoria couldn’t describe them any better.

“Yeah….” She took a deep breath. “Look, I don’t really want to ruin your Christmas or anything, but I learned what happened to you and why you had to leave the school. I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I never had a chance to tell you how shocked I was.”

Samantha got silent. At first, Victoria thought there was something wrong with the connection. Long distance calls had this annoying tendency of breaking or cutting off in the least expecting moment, but it wasn’t New York’s fault. Hunching over the phone, she waited for any scrap of breath or another shaken, blurted-out word, but the other side became dull and soundless. Perhaps she went too far. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Hello?” She tried to make sure that the girl hadn’t hung up on her. No one would blame her if she did though, even Victoria Chase.

“You had tons of chances and you didn’t take any of them.” Samantha’s voice was barely hearable, but soft, not accusing and very wary. Watchful. She didn’t want to start any war or make more enemies, even if the battlefield was far away from her new home. “But never mind, it’s a holy time, right?”
Perhaps it would be better to just finish this miserable, pathetic conversation that didn’t lead anywhere. What could Samantha tell her anyway? There was no valuable information this girl could have or any secret she could reveal. Everything was in her files, described very vividly. Broken ribs. Bruises. Attempts of choking. Frustrating waste of time, although Victoria couldn’t force herself to just finish the call, courting seconds of bizarre stillness.

She closed her eyes. It didn’t feel good to be forgiven. It sucked big time.

“Nathan really did it, didn’t he?”

This time she didn’t have to wait long.

“Nathan really…” Samantha hesitated for a second but then chuckled as if reacting to a good, not so funny joke. “He… ruined my life. He betrayed me. The only thing I did wrong was be nice to him. I’m a nice person. I was a nice person.” A sob. Or another chortle. Victoria wasn’t sure. “I was trying to make him feel better, protect him and just show him I cared. His father wasn’t treating him well, people at school hated Nathan. They hated me too, but never really attacked me. And he… You know what he did.” Her voice got stronger. No shakes, no shivers. No frustrating pauses. “It’s still there. Inside. Still, burns and the fire never ends. I’m broken. He broke me. You can call me a coward or a snowflake like my parents do, but I’m still afraid to… to even leave my home now. Or my room. Since then.”

The necklace got pulled so hard that it bruised her neck. Victoria untangled her fingers from the golden strings and stopped by the fireplace, playing with a stone’s edge. That wasn’t something she really wanted to hear though. A sneery comment or a vicious, mocking attack would be more fitting. A dark, painful truth was making her fucking uncomfortable leaving her empty-handed without any response prepared. Exposed. Naked. People had this annoying tendency to share stuff nobody cared about, or cared too much. Fuck this poor girl. Samantha had never been like super outgoing, but it sounded like a private, mental jail that she was in. A prison that Nathan Prescott, her own and the only friend, put her in. Her own dark room.

“So, you are like… homeschooled?” She asked trying to focus on the practical side of things.

Samantha scoffed gently.

“I’m like no schooled, Victoria. Learning wasn’t going so great after that as well. I can’t really focus on anything, it’s like so complicated now. I liked reading but now…” Suddenly the phone got scratched, like a little mouse desperately trying to get out of a trap. “I don’t even know why I’m telling you this.”

“I… I don’t mind,” Victoria said quickly fumbling over her words. She was good at a lot of things, quite excellent in a few, but being empathetic and discussing somebody’s mental problems wasn’t her strong suit. On the other hand, she wouldn’t forgive herself for just dropping off. Her fingernail almost got broken, locked in a crack between a stone rail. “Like… Maybe it will be helpful to tell me things, right? Therapeutic.”

“Therapeutic…” Samantha repeated slowly. “Nothing is really… working. We tried everything. Doctors, therapy, shrinks, pills. I just… like to hide. I have to hide all the time. I can’t even walk to the mall now or enjoy the holiday fair. It’s so sad. I’ve always loved the town in the winter.” Victoria could hear the miserable, withdrawn smile. Stupid. You couldn’t hear anybody smiling on the phone. “The shopping center is always so shiny, with all the decorations and lights…”

The Blackwell queen, not feeling very royal right now, swallowed hard unintentionally picturing herself in Samantha’s place, being in her room alone, locked down in her ivory tower, isolated from
her friends and acquaintances and changing into a scared, grey mouse. Her luxurious castle at the top floor didn’t seem so alluring when somebody was forced to stay there no matter what. The quiet cyclone of her own thoughts wandered to Max, this little irritating gay freckle, who showed her so much support and understanding when she cried her eyes out in the school bathroom, not asking for a favor in return. Victoria always felt better than her, more superior than all those people, believing she was above them, and now, nibbling the stone garlands surrounding the fireplace, she started to question her approach to pretty much everything.

“If you were here we could go together.” She said finally with her throat still dry. Standing stagnant got painful so she started to stroll around the humongous Christmas tree. The high heels were making so much empty and echoing noise. Stupid marble floor.

“We wouldn’t but thank you.” Samantha’s voice got warmer. “I really appreciate it. And for the phone call.”

“You’re welcome. Merry Christmas, Samantha.”

“More like happy holidays. We are not exactly…”

“My fault, I’m so sorry.” Victoria corrected herself quickly. “Anyway, take care and let me know if you will ever be in town.” They both knew it would never happen. Samantha Myers would never set foot anywhere close to Arcadia Bay or the West Coast in general. She would never leave her safe space.

Safe space. Prison.

When Victoria started this call, she hoped the girl would lie to her, show her mean bitch face, argue and give her a reason not to believe all the hard evidence. She was prepared for a battle, another fucking brawl like the ones she had with Rachel. A quick, sharp exchange of puns and punches, so she could tell Samantha to go fuck herself. She really believed that between untruths and twisted accusations she would be able to find the reason why Nathan acted like he acted. Something to hold onto. Something to save her own self-respect.

Her pink, velvet phone case was stained with her fingerprints all over.

“I will.” Samantha sensed that the call was almost over. She wanted it to be done with herself. Bits and pieces of human decency didn’t let her to just click her former colleague off, even if a warning seemed silly. “Victoria? Please, stay away from Nathan Prescott. I know you are friends with him and such, but… one day he will cross the line as he did with me. One day he will betray you, jump on you and….” She chuckled again, like saying a well-known, sort of joke. “…Do something horrible, out of nowhere. And the shiny shopping mall will be the least of your problems.”

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The blinking lights of the neighborhood were the only shield against the dense, winter darkness, as the whole chatter of preparations changed into a whisper and then died in a calm murmur of a TV and the logs breaking in flames at the fireplace. Their house, now cuddled by the cold night, was tranquil and quiet, letting them enjoy their moment alone. Parents, who finally made peace after hours of draining pressure and raised voices, were out as well celebrating in a more formal way. Joyce and David invited them to attend the special dinner at Two Whales as well, but Chloe politely
declined, not really considering their presence fitting or desired. Rachel didn’t argue with this decision, even if she wouldn’t mind joining this party and getting into a social spotlight for a while. Although, the evening with her girl was more tempting than any large and semi-strange crowd of people twice as old as them.

They rested on the couch in the living room finally taking over the TV, first skipping through the channels and then agreeing on one of the typical holiday movies that they both watched at least a hundred times, or so it seemed like. Chloe, who was so familiar with the plot she could quote every other word, got absorbed by it in minutes, first sitting straight, then hunching and leaning towards the screen, and finally slipping to the floor with easy access to the bowl of popcorn and the plate of cookies. Well, a plate. Cookies were nowhere to be seen already.

For Rachel, the movie wasn’t as interesting, as she quickly got bored with something so well-known, but watching her girl being so purely entertained by it was somehow charming. She caressed Chloe’s shoulders for a moment, enjoying the touch of her warm, flannel shirt, then tanged her fingers in the blue hair and played with the unruly strands. Her treasure didn’t mind, as a small smile appeared on her lips from time to time, but her sight was focused only on the TV. She didn’t even care to look around.

The silent treatment was understandable, but Rachel gradually got annoyed by the lack of interest. Childish, stupid, immature, but she really craved for some notorious, blue attention. She pulled Chloe’s hair a little. Nothing. Scratched her shoulder. No reaction. Oh, for crying out loud, really?

“Comfortable?” She asked tickling Chloe’s neck with a mistletoe’s leaf that she found nearby. It was used for a quick kiss before and forgotten, but now it served as a quiet reminder that this tradition deserved more than just a peck on the lips. Her blue rebel nodded mumbling something quietly, nestling between Rachel’s legs and nonchalantly putting her hand on her girl’s knee. The movie was evidently way more absorbing than any kind of conversation.

The mistletoe was running circles around the pirate’s ear.

“Not now, Rach.” Chloe sniffed not turning back nor brushing off the tender touch.

The hazel eyes narrowed a bit. Not that Rachel always had to be in the center of her pirate’s universe or had anything against a peaceful movie night, but sidetracking her wife was simply too tempting. Sitting there in front of her, with her shirt barely buttoned and, oh damn, nothing beneath it, Chloe stretched a bit and ignored the mistletoe entirely. The blonde devil tilted her head as her finger started to stroke her girl’s neck, traveling down to her cleavage and provoking the red flannel’s folds. One stroke, another. Chloe scoffed. One more touch. A short gasp. The leaf was making its way up and down too. Not uncovering much and not palpably inviting, Rachel noticed with a considerable dose of satisfaction that her effort was slowly making an effect.

One of the blue exhales got shredded to pieces.

“You smell so nice...” she whispered into her ear when her fingers started to undo Chloe’s shirt slowly. Button, journey down, another button, almost innocently, just to let her chest wave under the breath more easily. That was the official explanation if anybody would ask. Well, no asking though. Her pirate inhaled deeply once, then again, not stopping her but remaining occupied by the movie. The blue hand was betraying Chloe slowly though, as her fingers grasped more of her wife’s knee but damn, she wasn’t gonna give up so fast. Rachel closed her eyes feeling her own body getting heavier with yearning, but her rebel seemed quite immune to this game. Too immune.

Challenge. Good old challenge.
“Uh-huh.” Chloe still tried to focus on the bright screen, the only fully lit up spot in the room, but her sight was getting fuzzy. The TV was still in front of her, humming softly with screams, sharp dialogue and giggles, but it might as well be in a different world right now, behind a thick, steamy glass. “Rach…” she whispered gently tilting her head to the other side allowing the traveling finger to continue its voyage. It circled around her neck, traced her jawline, retracted to the earlobe supported by the leaves of the mistletoe.

It was hard to take another inhale without selling herself out.

Scoffing gently, the pirate straightened up a bit, not willing to surrender just yet. Rachel’s lips were almost touching her ear, she could hear the breath begging to become a whimper. Chloe rarely was playing hard to get, usually first to switch to more carnal activities, as her possessiveness was damn legendary. Now her resistance became a test for them both. A dare that Rachel couldn’t resist to and didn’t really plan on it. She moved closer kissing the blue hair and caressing Chloe’s shoulders, still trying to play it slowly as a result of pure coincidence and consequence of sitting so close to her.

“And you taste even better.” A kiss was placed on her shoulder, and then her lips went up to Chloe’s neck and hair again.

“Damn you.” She heard a quiet chuckle. “What are you doing?”

“Playing with fire, I guess… “Rachel’s finger was slowly opening up the unbuttoned checkered shirt discovering that Chloe indeed didn’t wear anything else underneath. That discovery cost her a bitten lip. Damn it, she was gifted with this sight every single day but couldn’t stop watching. Right now, her treasure’s nakedness was hidden in the shadows, lit up only by the blue light of the screen and the fireplace’s orange sparks, dancing between the warm and cold breath. Fire and ice. She gasped hearing Chloe’s sharp breath. The defiance drenched with shades were making the known even more unknown and tantalizing. “I’m just secretly interested in what’s under this shirt…” she whispered.

The flannel folds got shut down, and the view disappeared from Rachel’s eyes. Ouch.

“That secret has to be carefully protected,” Chloe responded, covering herself but with a certain spark in her eyes, indicating that the TV was no longer the main point of interest. The stubborn disobedience wasn’t her intention though, but she wanted to keep up with this act for a minute or two longer. Seducing Rachel was the best one, and it didn’t happen that often recently. They were usually too hungry for each other or too fast with signs of affection between classes, exams, trips home and possible walk-ins of the parents. Now, entirely alone, they could play the oldest game in the world.

The game that Chloe enjoyed way more than she would like to admit.

“Even from me?” Rachel responded but too turned on to even act startled.

“Especially from you.” The blue eyes narrowed for a moment in a way that took Rachel’s breath away, but then her pirate turned back to the TV, winning the award for best actress at tonight’s performance. The gesture was punished by opening the shirt widely, this time with one and a very definite move. Rachel could be patient and forbearing, but no one would take away her already captured territory. Chloe’s eyebrow furrowed. “And now you uncovered it just like that…” She stretched her neck slowly, first to the left, then to the right as her palm covered the curious hand not stopping its passage. “Bad girl.”

Rachel’s lips were back on her hair, her finger slowly moved to Chloe’s chest stroking every detail of the landscape now unashamedly unprotected. The blue shiver appeared almost at once, as the
pirate was slowly surrendering to the sweet art of seduction. Her pant got hefty.

“You love bad girls,” Rachel whispered.

Chloe swallowed hard, pressing her back firmer to the couch, wanting to be closer. Rachel’s breath was burning her skin, the overlooked mistletoe still tickling. The fingernails scratched the naked land lightly, not leaving a mark though but building up the hunger. First to the left, then to the right, back to the center, up and down. Not random moves but a planned tactic, as every move was very much calculated.

Not giving up, not giving up. Resist. For like ten seconds, alright, five.

“Just one,” Chloe whispered with difficulty feeling her ear being nipped. It was torture not being able to look at Rachel now as her own need was escalating quickly. Giving up just to touch and breathe, instead of the familiar hazel gaze, the pirate closed her eyes for a moment, awaiting the next step. It came in the form of a brief stroke down her chest and brush of the blonde lips. No kissing. Kissing was too much.

“This one really likes what she sees now.” She could feel Rachel’s smile against her skin and small murmur caressing her temple. The finger traveled in swirls, getting bolder and more courageous. Her wife stopped lying that it was just an innocent exploit out of boredom. Chloe’s body tensed and bent over slightly. “Oh, you like my little exploration, I can see. Let me explore more.”

“You’re asking for a lot, Rachel Price.” The last line of defense was almost overcome. Chloe didn’t even notice when the shirt fell from her shoulders hanging sadly on her arms only. It wasn’t easy to stay in place, keeping the moment going, but she couldn’t move even an inch, enchanted by the soft, magical touch and fascinated by the lights reflecting on her own skin. Blue from the TV already forgotten and reddish from the fireplace’s flames. On and off. Blinking.

Rachel moaned lightly.

“I’m not asking, Chloe. I’m just gonna take it by storm.” She started kissing the back of her neck, gently getting lower. Kiss by kiss, Rachel did not miss a spot in this careful and intoxicating study that made the pirate’s hair stand up. The slow treatment was killing Chloe in a good way, making her heart pounding and keeping her in place by a carefully delivered spell. Her usually impatient blonde devil wanted every piece of her, and she was marking her with herself in a very deliberate and gentle way. Yeah, she didn’t have to ask. She was just… Taking over.

“How big of a storm?” Chloe gasped feeling the new tide of kisses coming. It was hard to keep with this marine metaphor, but it was making it even more special, more theirs.

“It will be slow at first. I want it slow.” The fingers came back to the blue chest with a more sinister intention. The goal was set, now it was just a matter of execution. “I like to tease the waters.”

“Uh…” Chloe lifted her head not able to stop staring. “You like to have all your destinations exposed?”

“I like to draw on them.” Rachel’s fingers moved slowly back to Chloe’s neck and then streamed down to her chest, traveling in circles to the left. The blue pirate took a deep breath. “Let’s start here...”

Suddenly, Chloe got shy and shifted nervously, not used to being so exposed. Being naked hadn’t been a problem, hell no, but staring at the painfully slow admiration was a little bit weird. Not weird actually, wrong word, she just felt way too open, always covered either by the sheets, pieces of
clothing or Rachel herself. Well, except when they had been drunk or high, but it didn’t really count as far as Chloe was concerned. This one whiskey shot wasn’t enough though, not for this thing. She wanted to cover herself and made a quick, sloppy attempt to put her shirt back.

The fingers stopped.

Rachel noticed this move but said nothing, just kissing her hair, patiently waiting for Chloe to decide. If her pirate preferred to switch to something rapid and hasty, she wouldn’t oppose, even if hoping that they could keep continuing with this game. Pushing without pressure, she waited patiently, even if being eaten up with her own fierce need. Her blue treasure was indeed on edge, not sure how much she wanted to let herself go with this play and ordering her to do what her angel wanted seemed unfair. Pirates didn’t give up like that. Storms were supposed to be brisk and speedy. Rachel, her Rachel, was with her though, not demanding, waiting and secretly enjoying this struggle. This choice would have consequences, her fingers whispered tracing another invisible line on the bare shoulder. Choose wisely. The blue shyness shivered in an adorable, cute way, making it even more fascinating.

“Uh-huh,” Chloe whispered finally giving up. Her surrender was calm, not enforced, just another step into unknown waters. A very sober step. She gasped under the touch looking for a hideout in Rachel’s lips, and the safe harbor was graciously granted. They could stop at any point or just switch it to something way more common, but the blue pirate didn’t really want to.

The blonde locks were tickling her skin, fingers were stroking the indistinguishable tracks slowly, in an unhurried trance. Reaching and playing with the peak, the touch was retracing and evoking, enticing and inviting, promising and keeping its word with another slide. Chloe licked her lips, noticing how dry they became and bowed her head concentrating on one spot only. Enchanted by the lines drawn on her own body she held her breath, and the exploded in a gasp.

“Moving to the other island…” Rachel hummed.

“It was…” The blue flame disappeared under the eyelids for a long while. “It was getting lonely.”

Chloe’s temple got kissed, and then Rachel paused, almost broke down in half by her own shiver. It didn’t go unnoticed as her blue pirate panted, reckoning how much this whole journey was impacting her girl and how obsessed she was with this tour. It was nothing new though, with so many years into the relationship, but this blonde sailor could still have ways to amaze her, surprising herself along the way.

“And down the stream... Oh, and then…” Rachel’s palm covered the belt buckle with a clear intention to open it.

Chloe tried to smirk but failed badly, and touched her hand, with fingers dancing on the skin, scratching a bit in an uncontrolled tremble. Some time ago she would be afraid that it was just another play, an act that would leave her undone, thirsty and abandoned. Those fears were patched up and sealed in the basement of her memory. The game was different, the stakes became higher. Rachel was different too, seized and tamed by her own addiction to the blue pirate. The fact of how much she was wound up and aroused just by a few small gestures that didn’t have to lead to anything more profound was speaking volumes. Screaming even. Rachel Price dropped her game, still being in charge but giving up at the same time. She wanted Chloe so much that it was almost painful but would surrender this need if asked.

Her hand went lower still not sneaking under the surface. Her grasp got greedier for a moment, almost vulgar in its manner, and retracted when Rachel heard the sharp, sweet reaction.
“Down there?” Her pirate whispered.

The blue earring tickled her ear when Rachel nodded.

“Yeah…” Her fingers were dancing on the belt buckle. “…But I don’t want to be… unwelcomed.”

If Chloe had any power over her own body, she would scoff or even laugh shortly. Unwelcomed. Good joke. But it wasn’t funny. Now taken captive with her own longing, she had to focus very hard to speak out.

“I like to be innocent sometimes,” Chloe responded, noticing her pants getting slowly undone. Inch by inch as Rachel wanted her to observe it. The rebel’s fingers grasped at her girl’s knees, as the wait got even more burning.

“Oh yeah?” She heard Rachel’s husky whisper. “Do you like to be innocent right now?”

The swing of the blue feather on her neck was as sharp as a scratch, even if barely touching her. Every single small thing was making a world of difference, adding a different flavor, taste, marking the new direction. A murmur of the TV. The fireplace still cracking. The slow, gentle tempest. The burning, hot, fierce storm she was surrendering to inch after inch, line by line.

They moaned softly at the same time.

“No.” It was difficult to talk with her head thrown back on Rachel’s shoulder, with her back bending at the first touch. Very slow, very tender touch, destroying every remaining resistance that was fake to begin with. Her blonde devil won. She always had to win, getting what she wanted, but Chloe was the one in need now. She was in control. Her hips bucked with a silent, violent plea and her wish was granted quickly.

“Good girl.” Rachel slid to the floor, sitting directly behind her and ready for the next step. So ready.

The blue pirate closed her eyes feeling the shimmer of blonde eyelashes on her cheek. The hazel eyes were still out of her reach though. The blue earring whirling upon her skin was making her crazy, but it was a beautiful madness. Fitting.

“You love good girls.” She licked her lips.

“Just one.” Rachel was watching her, she could feel this stare. “I can stop…” The view was so bewildering that she almost cried out directly to Chloe’s ear. “But I really don’t want to stop.” Her moves became more impatient but still slow, still gentle. She wanted to take all the time in the world and hoped that her amazing, and, oh so beautiful girl, wouldn’t like them to rush much. Always so much in the fever, it felt so good to study every single breath, every reaction and twitch, exploring, unwrapping, uncovering, letting to adjust before the next attack.

Chloe’s body bent almost in an arc in a wave of temptation. The conquer had never been so peaceful and daring before. Rachel had to close her eyes, stifling a possessive hiss.

“Please, don’t stop.” She heard a very quiet cry.

Her body was yielding to her touch, directed by the slowly growing pace. Rachel was watching the waves crashing through the blue fever from a new perspective. Or rather, tried to watch, since, even if still untouched, she was so close to her own fulfillment. Chloe threw her head back on her shoulder with her breath rigged, not bothered by how much of a show she was giving, not giving a fuck about being exposed or not. More. She just wanted more. She reached for Rachel, holding onto her neck and dragging her closer, hoping for a kiss or just to cover herself in the gold waterfall of
hair. Her girl was way more interested in the view though, admiring the landscape transforming under every single stroke. Lost in the moment, between the touch and a pant, she didn’t refuse the request though, kissing her briefly but leaving the blue lips half-open.

The murmur of an old TV was a calm soundtrack to their act, competing with the loud moans, a rustle of the upholstery of the couch and quiet ring of many of Rachel’s bracelets. Chloe’s chest was shamelessly waving in the rapid whimpers as the pirate herself didn’t care about covers or flannels. She didn’t care about anything but the steady pace, the touch and Rachel being close. Closer. And faster.

Her hair got pulled a little.

“Rach…” She warned her as the blue eyes shut down. The final moan was eaten by a long, starving kiss. Rachel felt being held so firmly it was almost hurting, but she let her girl be as intense as she wanted, as violent in her spasm as possible and was finishing her knowing exactly how to make it sweeter, more extended and richer.

Chloe cried out, then tightened her lips trying to suppress her own reaction, not to give herself away that much. It wasn’t wild, harsh or rough, but somehow crazy, even if drowned in darkness and the dim blinking lights. Rachel slowed down, kissing her girl’s neck, dazed by the small shivers, and then started again, carefully, not shying over that she wasn’t done with the conquer. She wanted to take her again, maybe even a few more times in a row, feel the exasperated bend one more time. This time no respectful pause occurred.

One more fulfillment came in just seconds without much effort. Chloe reacted so sharply that she had to be held in place for the sake of both their well-being. Then she stopped Rachel’s hand painting and fell into her girl’s arms totally exhausted. She got a kiss on her neck, and her shirt got properly adjusted. Done. Another round wasn’t forced or even suggested.

“Ha,” Rachel whispered, sweeping away the blue, sweaty strokes from Chloe’s forehead.

“Victory…”

The blue eyes opened up almost immediately.

“Am I a conquer to you?” She asked when Rachel finally released her hand and tangled her fingers in the blue hair continuing with the slow and now less passionate kisses. She loved her blonde angel kissing her like that. Slowly, but with a hidden storm, tender but firm, knowing exactly how to bring her back and provide the safe landing. Well damn, she just fell from heaven, she needed to be taken care of. The air became thicker though, as their breaths didn’t want to slow down.

“A constant one.” Rachel was shivering a little still drunk with everything that just happened. “It’s always challenging, baby. Every day I’m learning what you like and what you want. I love…” She smiled lightly. “Opening you up. Cross the lines. And hell, I want all your wishes to come true… Not only mine. Just like this… I hazard to guess you liked it.” Then she got pushed against the couch and covered by her blue treasure who either got shy again or strived for revenge. “Whoa… What was that for?”

The exhaustion of the intense finale was nowhere to be seen as Chloe grabbed her firmly burying lips in hers and tightening a grasp in the blonde hair. Noticing she was going a little bit too fast, fueled by the need of immediate payback, she slowed down even if both of them already dedicated this moment to fever. It was a natural reaction for her to hide, so embarrassed and nervous by moving a step further. First the orange box, then this. Nothing big really happened, it wasn’t like super ordinary, but Chloe felt the change. Bizarre, right? Rachel understood though and didn’t oppose, stroking her cheek in pure awe and admiration.
“To tame my conqueror?” The pirate’s lips brushed hers but didn’t kiss yet. “To show her what I want? I got greedy.”

Rachel tilted her head slowly, still stunned and then allowed herself to move her shoulder shyly, in an attempt of a shrug that reached its peak but never felt down. They were looking at each other for a second, five, ten, as the blonde angel was trying to put some words together in a coherent, brave, maybe clever sentence, but nothing came out of it. No wit was needed. She looked down at her girl’s nakedness in supposed amazement, but frankly, it was just a trick to hide her withdrawn smile.

“I thought you were busy and didn’t have time for that…” Her eyebrow rose coyly. The finger started to retrace the map, seducing and taking advantage of the territory uncovered. “…Ride.”

Chloe smirked, now baffled a bit by the blonde quietness. She leaned in for a kiss so slowly that her lips got burned by Rachel’s breath a few times before it occurred.

“I have a better ride in mind.” She whispered, encouraged to discover something new as well. Unpacking presents had never felt so good before.

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“I heard that you’re one of the finalists of the new photo contest. I’m glad.” Sean Prescott stretched out not looking at his son and trying to focus on his golden watch. The bellowed symbol of status came in handy when he felt perturbed and needed a distraction, simply moving it around his wrist. He cleared his throat expecting a reaction, but the room remained silent, drowning in the shadows along with his only, troubled son. Very well. Children, even if complemented, were supposed to listen, not interrupt. Not to mention that Sean Prescott was more used to scolding and reprimanding that actually praising his kids. It required ditching the studied and practiced act and becoming more vulnerable. Soft.

He hated soft.

“Thank you, father.” He heard a very discreet, well-balanced response. Sean Prescott sighed deeply. Why didn’t his boy grow a pair and couldn’t start acting like a real man. Almost twenty, grown up and leading a colorful party life, Nathan played tough among his friends but was still unable to rise to his family’s expectations. Everything about his son was docile and meek. Uninteresting.

“I’m glad I’m not wasting my money for nothing.” Sean Prescott turned back to him finally, taking a glass of brandy from the table and walking a few steps towards Nathan. The boy shivered and looked down, making little funny noises, a cacophony of giggles, rapid inhales and chokes. Sean Prescott throttled a groan. “Jefferson is pretty fond of you, that’s good, but you have to remember that life is not only work. It’s important to keep the right balance and… have some fun.” He took a sip of brandy, put the glass away and opened the walnut chest’s drawer. “I have a proper gift for you, I believe you are old and mature enough to keep it in your possession responsibly.”

Nathan slowly opened a handed package and started to tear apart the thin, white paper. The deeper he dug, the more aggravated and impatient his moves became in a strange, obsessive way that made his father walk a few steps away. This performance couldn’t trick the head of the Prescott family though. The boy liked to act crazy just to hide his weakness, as a simple strategy to avoid consequences pleading not guilty by the reason of false insanity. The floor quickly became thick with dead wrappers, as the strips of paper covered the bushy carpet, leather sofa, pillows emboldened with
Christmas ornaments, and even Nathan’s perfectly stylized hair. Rip, tear to shreds, break, repeat. More. More. Faster. His father was watching him with a stiff upper lip and with no expression on his face whatsoever.

Then his son froze, touched the gift, then looked at his father in amazement.

“A rifle?”

Sean Prescott nodded. That should teach this kid how to handle all contingencies.

“Our family was always very skilled in hunting and we always celebrated it as a part of our legacy and tradition. You should follow this custom, especially since the forests nearby are filled with tremendous and easy prey. It’s very good and developmental entertainment, teaching you about how to avoid obstacles and dealing with your own fears and boundaries.” When he had gotten his first weapon, Sean was not even fourteen and learned a lot, including how to make a quick decision, even if heavy with deadly consequences. It made him the man he was today. The man he wanted his son to become. “We should go hunting together, like you always wanted, Nathan. You and me.” He suggested without great enthusiasm, but it was his duty to show Nathan how to embrace his heritage. His fate.

Evidently his son really liked the gift, feeding his eyes on the polished, oiled wood of the forearm, the dark, heavy barrel, and his own name carved on the surface.

“You and me.” Nathan was tasting those words, sucking on them, chewing. Father and son, Together. Killing. “You and me… Only?” His eyes sparkled.

There was something weird and bizarre in this twinkle, but Sean Prescott preferred to think it was just childish eagerness and joy from an expensive and vital gift. That thought made him quite content though. His son expressed interest in something manlier than this artsy-fartsy crap, finally accepting something else than an expensive set of lenses or a new digital camera. Of course, it was appreciated that Nathan was doing so well under Jefferson’s guidance, but Sean Prescott really hoped it was just a phase, not a final destination. Except if his son would become the greatest artist in the world. Then maybe.

“Unless you would prefer a bigger crowd. How are the things with your girlfriend? Rachel, right?” He added nonchalantly but minded asking about this young woman a long time ago. Nathan hadn’t mentioned the DA’s daughter recently and that made Sean worried. He really hoped this relationship was still going and perhaps changing into something way more serious. It would be so much easier to do business not worrying about the district attorney’s office lurking into his stuff.

“Rachel…” Nathan laughed shortly and then got deadly serious. “Ah, she is very busy lately. I’m busy too. I… I… We don’t have much time to meet and talk and stuff and… and… and…” Sean Prescott almost rolled his eyes. Jesus, this boy couldn’t even put one sentence together. “It’s…. She applied to Harvard…”

Their private conversation almost came to an end when Sean's wife with Kris strolled through the room, chatting joyfully. He got a few scraps about Brazil, her research and a few meetings tomorrow, but decided not to interfere or rather discuss things later. If his daughter wanted to sneak out to see this girl that caused all the trouble, he would have to take decisive steps calling for instantaneous action. Nathan covered his present, afraid of their reaction but didn’t say a word, waiting, just like his father, for them to vanish in another room. Excellent decision, it was better not to worry the women about the guns in the house. They didn’t have to know. Much.

“Harvard? Certainly a good choice.” Sean Prescott warmly welcomed the information about
Rachel’s future, when they got left alone. Quote impressive but didn’t explain why his son wasn’t in
touch with his girlfriend more often. Yet another lesson he had to teach his heir. “Nathan, no woman
is that busy especially if she is dating a man of a certain position, Ivy league or not. Maybe you could
invite her for a Christmas dinner this year?” He suggested burning his lips with another sip of
brandy. “It’s the holidays after all and I would like to have a word or two with her.”

Nathan’s fingers grasped on the stock of the rifle. Obviously, the boy wasn’t comfortable with
introducing his date to the parents. Natural, more than predictable. Finally, some perfectly human
reaction.

“She’s out of town.” He mumbled, lowering his sight. “Like visiting her DA father and things like
that. California.”

The ice in the glass clanked loudly. Sean Prescott scrutinized his only son, wondering if he was fed
with another silly teenage lie or if there was some truth to it. Rachel Amber wouldn’t have any
reason to stay in the dorms during the holiday break though, and, as every young lady, wouldn’t
mind spending her father’s money in Beverly Hills’ stores.

“Pity.” Sean said and finished his drink, officially ending this meeting. He had a few calls to make
and his son had taken enough of his precious time. “I’m sure Kris would like to meet her.”

“Oh, yes.” Nathan responded with a strange smirk painted on his face. “I’m sure Kris would love to
meet her.” And he bowed his head again, stroking the shape of the new toy, thinking about his sister,
who despite her sick and twisted desires, now became the apple of her father’s eye.

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“I have a gift for you.” Murmured Rachel, laying on the blue chest.

Chloe stretched a little and yawned. To be honest, she was pretty much beat-up and tired. First the
Joyce’s Christmas boot-camp, then the exploration with Rachel had taken all her energy and she
wouldn’t mind regenerating in the most common way, falling the fuck asleep. The fact that her girl
wanted to talk now could mean that something very dangerous was coming, or extra sweet. Neither
possibility would pass muster or could be tense-free.

“In this house we’re unpacking gifts in the morning.” She mumbled trying to delay whatever was
coming, getting so incredibly comfortable that was one blink away from a nap. The dense and quiet
darkness of the room along with her own pleasant and heavy laziness were calling her out,
demanding to cut this talk short. There was still a chance for dozing off that her body begged for, but
it required some resistance. Resistance required power though and probably more talking. What a
vicious circle.

“Really?” Rachel’s eyebrow furrowed. “You didn’t oppose this idea a few hours ago. Plus, it’s after
midnight so, morning already. I would really prefer to give it to you when we are alone instead of in
front of your parents.” She rested her chin on her palm tightening her lips to hide an impish smirk.
“Since it’s hella romantic you might get embarrassed and stuff…”

Chloe winced and squinted one eye, a little bit intrigued. Alright, now she had to know. No naps.

“Oh, boy.” She sighed exaggeratedly. “How romantic? Are you taking me to Paris or some shit?”
“You don’t even have a passport yet.” Rachel put a finger on Chloe’s lips preventing another outbreak of jokes or yawning. Sense of humor was out of stock at the moment and it got the blue pirate more interested and a bit nervous. “So… Before we got married…”

“First geography, now a history lesson.”

The blue arm got smacked lightly.

“Shut up. Before we got married you gave me this ring that you had been dragging with you all the time. Very beautiful ring.” Rachel said playing with the amber decorating her finger. It had been there for such a long time that Chloe almost forgot how her hand looked like without the engagement ring and she didn’t really miss the view. It was a damn fine piece of jewellery, she had to admit congratulating herself for her good taste. When she was buying it, this thing seemed nice, but on Rachel’s hand it changed into something more than a band with a rock with a hefty price tag. Funny, how a piece of metal could make such an important connection, building a bridge over a half-burnt land.

Chloe sighed, trying to guess what was on her girl’s mind. Her personal intuition failed and shrugged though, deciding to disappear in her own weariness. Uh, fine. Not fine. Deprived of her instinct, the blue confusion had two options now. Either getting into sweet recalls of their weddings, that could take the whole night, or brush it off pretending that it wasn’t worth elaborating. Regarding her state and still a high hope to cuddle her blonde angel to sleep in the next fifteen minutes she went with the latter.

“Yeah. I remember.” Chloe stated boldly. “And then I put a more permanent one on your finger.” She tapped Rachel’s wedding band. “So?”

Their fingers intertwined, and her wife started to stare at her in a weird, possessive and cautious way. It took just a moment, five seconds, maybe ten, but it was enough to wake Chloe’s mind the hell up, guessing what this little fire dragon was hiding up her proverbial sleeve. Very proverbial, since they still were naked.

“So…” Rachel vanished between the sheets and kissed the blue shoulder appearing on the surface. “…Since we do everything backwards, I have an engagement ring for ya.” A small velvet box appeared in her hand out of nowhere. She had to have it prepared for quite some time between the comforters or under the pillow. The blue pirate looked at the package, being slowly opened and oddly forgot how to breathe. Strange, how a piece of jewellery could impact the most basic function of her body. Rachel with a ring box was something that was still unimaginable though, even if months after the haste tie-knotting. “Equality, right?” Her girl whispered sensing the pressure and quietly reached for Chloe’s hand. “May I?”

“Oh…” The blue throat got drastically dry. “You got it the easy way without the big question and shit.” She was clearly grateful it wasn’t handed to her in front of her parents. Joyce would freaking love it too much. Or not too much.

“Yeah, sneaky.” Rachel tossed the box away and lied back on Chloe’s chest, supporting her chin on the crossed arms, still staring at her. Chloe could count the stars in the hazel eyes if she had some spare time, like free eternity or so. “It looks good on you. Do you like it?”

The blue pirate was terrible at this. She was terrible from the get-go, not knowing how to react to those things, how to actually behave. Getting that kind of gift had been one of her biggest fears, not because she didn’t want to, but simply because she didn’t know what to do with herself. And Rachel wanted her to say things. Like appropriate things. Important. Something she would quote for another five years or so. Or longer.
“I… Yeah. I like it a lot. I love it. It… fits.” Chloe’s eyes got a little bit too itchy. She quickly rubbed them and looked at her finger decorated in a new, blueish band. It was so gleaming and new, even if nothing about it was a shocker. More like the missing patch, final touch, completing the other side of the bridge. Her girl was waiting for something more though. Something Chloe was supposed to notice. “It looks a little bit familiar?” She tried.

Tilting her head, Rachel watched the blue hand waving in the flash of neighborhood lights, catching the bright reflections with the top of her fingertips. She covered Chloe’s palm with hers for a second, then let it sail free, then caught again and brought it up to her lips, kissing.

“How familiar,” she said. “It’s customized to look like my bracelet. You can see the waves here and here, but I didn’t want it to be that obvious. I wanted to give you the bracelet though, but it kinda felt like leftovers? I don’t want you to wear something he did, but I still wanted you to have it somehow…”

Chloe’s eyelids fluttered quickly.

“I get it.” She cut Rachel off. “It would be awkward. This is better.” Their fingers laced again, now with no intention to separate. No flying free. The blue pirate smirked bravely. “At least I don’t have to worry about ripping it off and shit. It’s really awesome. Thank you…” It was quite challenging to steal a kiss when Rachel was on her chest. Chloe liked challenges and was damn good at succeeding in those. “Damn, I’m engaged. Who would’ve thought.”

The ring was slid on the middle finger, taking its place beside the wedding tattoo.

“Surprise.” She said with a mischievous grin and kissed Chloe’s chin. To be honest, Rachel went through a wrestling match with her own doubts ordering this ring. First, it wasn’t very needed, and her rebel never expressed a serious interest in expensive jewellery. Second, gifting her with an engagement ring for Christmas seemed too ordinary, something that regular people would do, exposing their perfectly white smiles during a kodak moment. Third, even if not directly, it was related to Bowers. Rachel hated that everything about their marriage always had some strings attached to him, and, on top of everything, this thing served as a reminder of Sera. Great job, Rach. Perfect. Chloe deserved the best though, she deserved the world and you just gave her bits and pieces of everything she felt so unsure about. Trying to kill two birds with one bracelet-like band, Rachel hoped to patch up this wound once and forever or at least cover the scars. Chloe didn’t like forever that much though. Eternity together, sure, but not without gloomy and ugly recalls. Memories were as important to her as the stream of tomorrows. Sometimes more. Family. Patch. Her mother. Patch. Bowers. Promises broken. Patch.

She got kissed hard in the middle of self-doubting.

“Alright.” Chloe decided that it was too much tenderness and was done with melting under the hazel gaze. She pushed Rachel lightly and moved to the bed’s edge trying to drag something from underneath. “I have something for you too. Obviously.”

“Oh, Santa Claus decided that I was nice this year?” The blonde devil sat on the bed, denied her favorite support and put on a t-shirt found between the slumbers. “I prepared the cookies for him downstairs, just in case he would be tied after dragging all this junk from house to house.” She informed proudly watching Chloe’s back hanging out from the bed. Not only the back was catching her attention, so distracting her pirate was a must. Hearing a loud hiss, between huffs and puffs she laughed shortly. Whatever was hidden under their bed was taking a lot of effort to dig out, so it would be a sin not to disturb her pirate more.

“More like Santa Price. And you were naughty as hell, so here comes the reward.” Chloe gasped still
struggling. “Rach, stop poking my ass! Did you really prepare the cookies and stuff? Aren’t you too old to believe in this shit?” And without further ado, she finally dragged the huge piece of a gift on the blankets, trying to dust it off. Since it was hidden in the vault of her bed for such a long time it got quite filthy. Rachel never thought about lurking down there, trying very hard to forget that this space existed. Dirty corners were hiding a secret though, a fairly large one.

“I believe in undying love from first sight. Blame me.” She scratched the duct tape sealing the terribly packed present in the size of a movie poster. Tons of duct tape. “Should I unpack it?”

“You don’t have to.” Chloe sniffled and shrugged, falling on the pillows. This whole Christmas thing was really exhausting. She couldn’t understand people who liked those holidays. A heap of hard work, even at 3 am. “You can keep it wrapped up if it entertains you.”

Rachel shook her head and focused on the package, investigating slowly and trying to guess what was inside. The tradition called to shake this thing, but it was simply too dusty and too big. Obviously, it had to be some kind of poster. Or a photo. Or a painting. Something with a frame. And a glass, as she confirmed tapping on the surface lightly.

“What is it?” She gave up but still didn’t start tearing apart the carefully prepared present. It was an art form by itself and judging by the volume of filth, started to create its own ecosystem.

A certain blue rebel was very content with the fact that Rachel couldn’t guess shit. It was precisely designed to avoid a correct deduction though. A true surprise. A trap. Rachel really hoped it wasn’t another prank or weird artwork with some virgin with a sword in her hand, riding a unicorn with a rainbow in the background. She got one like that after her coming out talk with Victoria and Chloe almost met her final destiny, first choking from laughter, then from choking itself.

“Not an engagement ring, that’s for sure. And don’t you worry, there are more presents downstairs since my parents would flip the fuck out if I didn’t give you something officially. So, this is not official, alright? Just between us. More shit to unwrap later.” Her pirate winked. “Suffer.”

Rachel didn’t mind suffering in that way.

“You just like to spoil me.” She stated starting to unwrap the mystery. The paper mutilated with a tape wasn’t easy to rip apart and every attempt was making a lot of noise. It got so loud it could wake the parents sleeping calmly on the other side of the wall, even if they had a drink or two during their formal dinner. Rachel grimaced but kept tearing the wrapping down. Chloe sat back, awaiting the final reaction apparently very amused by the whole process. Before the last fold fell off, she was able to cover herself with her sleeping shirt and drink half a bottle of water. “Oh.” Rachel looked at the gift in all its glory. “Oh, wow. What is it?”

“A diagram? Uh…” Chloe scratched her head not sure how to explain it. “Well, that’s the price of dating... well, being married to a supposed scientist. It’s the panoramic view of the sky one certain night…” Her hand pointed at white dots and lines creating a complicated maze of connections on dark blue background. “…in May almost 4 years ago. That one night somebody promised me something and I promised it back. I know you like astrology and shit, so…”

It wasn’t an easy task to surprise Rachel. From Chloe’s experience it was practically impossible as her girl was damn good with her deductions. This time the blue treasure succeeded totally, and it made her feel weird. Like she did something right, but unforeseen and unusual as well. Special, right? It was supposed to be special.

“This is... astonishingly romantic. Thank you, baby.” Kissing was a little bit of a logistic exercise since most of the bed was occupied by a huge frame. Rachel managed without breaking the glass or
damaging her gift. “So that’s how it looked like?” She said in bewilderment studying the diagram once again. Stars, so many of them, flashing, blinking and winking. A hell of an audience that got entirely ignored.

“What? The sky? Uh, yeah. It was hella visible the whole night.” Chloe shrugged. “Well, except the fire and ash and stuff but…” Her fingers, armed by the freshly received ring, got kissed shutting her up for good.

“I was blinded by this one special person in front of me. Completely blinded.” Rachel loved watching the firmament from her window and taking short illegal walks around the neighborhood to her parents’ displeasure, dreaming and speculating about what stories were hidden behind the winking flashlights of the universe. As a kid, she believed in the magic power of a falling star, whispering her wishes every time she had seen one and feeling grim disappointment if it turned out to be a plane or other man-made signal. However, her deepest desire got fulfilled when she didn’t pay attention to the sky at all. She got up, put the frame against the wall and quickly came back to thank her pirate in a more convenient way. “Twinkle, twinkle little star, did you say your wish today?” She whispered after a solid set of gratitude delivered directly to the blue lips.

“I got my wish fulfilled. I still can’t believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“That you are here. With me. Mine. I just…” Chloe played with the line of Rachel’s hips, provoking the edge of her shirt and trying to cover her own bashfulness. “It just seems like a miracle.”

Miracle. More like hard work. Hours, days and weeks of studying her, discovering what she really wished for, letting her know she was so loved, waking up her trust and watching the tenderness being born. Snaps and arguments, scoffing and cracking, patching and tearing up the stitches. Yeah, there were some miracles too though, the ablest of them all.

The stars in Rachel’s eyes were getting brighter, lighting them both in their own private Christmas lights and the song of her breath was the best carol Chloe had heard in her entire life. They got enchanted, soaking in the atmosphere and into each other again and again, surrounded by the quiet buzz of the heater and their private, familiar darkness. The frame lowered against the wall slightly but politely didn’t fall down, not daring to disturb.

“You are so…” Rachel whispered and abruptly cut herself off.

The blue eyes squinted again. The hazel sky was damn bright, she was getting blind by all the falling stars there.

“Cute? Adorable? Badass? Hot as fuck?”

Brushing the hair out of the blue forehead, Rachel smiled coyly and then didn’t say anything for a very long time. It wasn’t the lack of words though, but a pure amazement, an admiration that was getting Chloe a little bit nervous. She grimaced, sniffled and wrinkled her nose twice, silently signaling that she wouldn’t mind an answer to her question. A good punch line requested cooperation.

“Beautiful,” said Rachel gently. “So beautiful that it should be illegal. And cute, adorable, badass and hot as fuck too.”

“You’re just saying it because it pumps your ego.” Chloe frowned thankful for the dense shadows in the room, trying to wiggle herself out of a stream of compliments. It didn’t occur often and was
usually making her cheeks painfully red. “Rachel Amber couldn’t afford to be with just an okay-looking gal.” Oh great, this sounded like a provocation. Chloe was terrible at this. Like really.

As presumed, her girl scoffed and poked her chest

“I thought we already went through this. Rachel Price, mind you, has very good taste. Very good. Exceptionally good, although her choices don’t disappoint her ego.” She jabbed her again. Twice.

Chloe pondered for a moment, hoping that the rhythm of her pounding heart wouldn’t betray her own perturbation. Hiding her pulse from this blonde monster on top of her was unmanageable, but she could always blame Rachel though. It was her girl’s fault anyway. The ring, the stars, the happiness. Rachel was found guilty of the crime of turning the blue world upside down and sentenced to live in prison. Captain Bluebeard’s loving penitentiary. Funny thing, she already made herself at home.

Home.

“What if I got into a terrible car accident and my face would half burn or some shit?”

“Oh, God.” Rachel growled hiding her face between Chloe’s breasts. It was the most creative and sexy version of a facepalm that the blue pirate had seen in her whole life. “Why so grim today? Do you want to be the Grinch or something?”

“Maybe, but that’s not what I’m asking.”

“You would still be beautiful. Even with scars, bruises or burns you would be an exceptional beauty anyway.” Her girl shifted, lying on her side, listening to the escalated ride of Chloe’s heart. What a race it was. “And, before you’re gonna ask again, yeah, I would be still here.”

“Even if I couldn’t walk?”

“Yeah.”

“Even if I was paralyzed or some shit?”

“Still here. You really think my ass is in your bed only because you’re a hottie? Cut me some slack, Chloe.” Rachel rolled back to her side of the bed. She didn’t like those questions that reeked of memories and recognizable doubts. Chloe always had to come up with some shit to break the mood. First the ring, then the stars, everything being so lovey-dovey and now this stupid, fucking survey. Always. Every time. “I’m not that shallow.” Draping a blanket around herself sent a clear message that the talk was over and if the blue investigation still wanted to catch some sleep, she was free to do so.

Chloe’s arms became very lonely.

“Oh, I know you’re not. Shit. I just thought you would ask me the same thing, so I could say something cute and romantic and everything about your beauty inside and stuff but you didn’t ask.” Being adorable and stumbling over her own words was a cheap and effective way out. It didn’t work this time though.

“I don’t want to.” Came the blonde impatient sigh.

“Oh, because you think I’m the shallow one here?”

“No, because you already showed me you are not.” Rachel answered to her pillow still wrapped in
the slumbers like one upset cocoon. “We’ve been through thick and thin and you’ve seen me at my worst, not being a stunning beauty at all. I have no reason to ask. It would be hella unfair.”

Then she got turned over in one gentle but definite move. Chloe might be tired but had enough gas in her tank to take serious action when needed. No one could fall asleep tonight before the air wouldn’t get cleared out. This old rule of not going to bed when angry at each other was unmanageable to keep up while living with Rachel, so she at least tried to fix stuff before passing out.

“I…” Chloe desperately tried to look into her eyes. What a fucking annoying, charming, stupid teddy bear. “I really don’t remember a time when you haven’t been beautiful. You are always beautiful, even if damn pissed like now. And tired. And like when you’re sick. Or… When you yell at me or when you cry… Always.” She wanted to ask her blonde angel not to be angry or just apologize but then, despite the darkness of the room, Chloe noticed a change. Oh. “And now you’re blushing.”

“It’s the snowball you threw at me.” Rachel’s voice was balancing between a hiss and a purr. “It made my face red.” Losing a fight before it even started she tried to turn back. Ineffectively.

“That’s the price of valor,” said Chloe softly. “I like when you blush, especially when I’m the one who caused it. It’s like a special pirate power or something. Glad I still have it.”

That was unfair. Rachel really wanted to stay angry for longer than ten minutes, maybe even till morning if she could produce enough perseverance. Of course, Chloe had to ruin it, trash the whole intention with her puppy eyes, what a monster. Fortunately, the blonde devil had one more card she could play tonight. A small envelope fell off on the bed when she was unwrapping her main gift and it didn’t get unnoticed. She suspected it was an additional personal message, something more than just a Christmas card, but wanted to open it later, perhaps when Chloe would finally pass out or wasn’t around. Desperate times called for desperate measures though and if the blue pirate was granted mercy a moment ago, she would have to face a pitiless attack now. No one could cause Rachel’s fluster without paying a price.

“Well, speaking of blush, what’s this little thing?” She asked, waving the letter in front of the blue eyes.

As expected, Chloe retracted immediately.

“It’s kinda useless, but whatever, ok?”

“No whatever. I want to…” The envelope got taken from her hand in a sign of a sudden mind change. “Hey! My wife gave that to me, get your hands away from it!” Rachel tossed away the blanket ready to fight over the piece of paper. “Stop it, Chloe! It’s mine now!” She smacked her arm trying to reach the letter. “Stop!” The blue panic got pushed away as the envelope finally got into Rachel’s hands. “Can I open it? Thank you.” Shaking her head, she unsealed the letter and took out one sheet of paper, with some handwriting on it. Yes, that was it. Just one page, but not covered in doodles though, or containing any kind of sketch. There were words. Chloe wrote words. Sentences. Something about being playful, angels, and navel. Rachel blinked. “Don’t tell me that… You wrote it?”

Chloe shut her eyes. Tightly.

“I wanted this thing to be more personal, not like I just ordered you a thing online and stuff.” She confessed. “It’s not attached to the picture or anything, so I guess you don’t have to include that and…” A finger to her lips was a definite end of the speech, but not the inner cringe.

“Shut up,” said her wife, this time gently and almost in whisper. Brushing off a stroke of hair was the
only way Rachel could try to hide how emotional she got. Her pirate tried to reach the piece of paper one more time, but the assault was avoided swiftly. “No.” Rachel stopped smiling. She was dead serious now. “Let me read it.”

Nervous as hell, Chloe crashed on the pillows covering her face in her hands, hoping the moment wouldn’t take long. What had gotten into her? Why had she even attempted to do it? Rachel deserved the best, right? All the surprises should be like amazing and stuff. This thing wasn’t even close to good. Like for real. Without false humility, Chloe Price was aware of her abilities as a writer. She sucked. End of story. The proof of it was in Rachel hands now. Literally.

“Just please, not aloud.” She groaned between her fingers, torn between watching her girl’s reaction and disappearing in the darkness of her palms.

It was taking longer than expected. Way longer than it should in general. It was like what, eight lines? Twelve? Rachel was a damn fast reader, she could swallow one book per day if she was in a rush, scanning the text with her eyes more than actually taking an effort to put words into sentences and making sense out of them. Now this piece of paper was taking her forever. Was she trying to memorize it or what? The hell?

Lastly, Chloe heard the rustle of a paper being folded and Rachel chuckling a little. Great, now she would laugh. Marriage or not, dedication, commitment and all that shit, but her girl would pee her pants giggling. Well, if she had any she would. Like for sure. Like...

“You wrote it by yourself?” She felt Rachel’s hand on her arm, as the fingers caressed her skin slowly.

“Yeah.” Chloe nodded. “I’m a crappy Shakespeare. Sorry. I... I’m...” And here the stutter came. And the blush. “I really... Uh... I feel stupid.” She scoffed so vexed at herself. Great idea, Chloe. Deliver your lack of any talent in this department as a Christmas gift. What an amazing fucking concept. Brilliant.


Somebody unfurled the curtain of her palms, touched her cheek and kissed her very slowly. It might’ve been Chloe’s imagination, but the taste was salty and a tad too wet. She frowned but wasn’t allowed to break free as another kiss came, pinning her to the pillows, like a butterfly nailed to the display. Understanding that she wasn’t the only shy one here didn’t come quickly enough.

“This is beautiful.” Rachel sniffled, apparently touched way more than Chloe would’ve suspected. “And brave.” She shook her head knowing how much it had had to cost to not just write it but to take the next step and give it to her, to deliver it in the form of a letter. Passionate about literature, Rachel had read a shitload of poetry, starting from the masters of the genre and ending on anonymous scribbles found online. It didn’t matter that this piece wasn’t glorious in wording or metaphors, damn simple with rhymes and losing its own rhythm from time to time. It was about her and for her and that made it the most amazing thing in the world. As far as she was concerned, Shakespeare could suck Chloe’s dick. “It so goes on this diagram. It will be displayed in our apartment in Boston, so everybody can see it.” Rachel announced, putting the paper back to the envelope and carefully stashing it behind the bed. Fuck yes, it would be framed. Fuck yeah, it would be hung somewhere she could see it every single day.

Maybe not in the living room though. They would have a living room, right?

Chloe wanted to push her, but just rolled her eyes, getting upset quite rapidly.
“Stop it! Aren’t you tired of embarrassing me?”

“I don’t want to embarrass you.” Rachel climbed on her chest again preventing another outburst of the blue storm. It took her a moment to win the struggle with her treasure, now drastically turning red. “I want to show off how loved I am. Big difference.”

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The light was cold, bright and blueish when it broke in through half-open blinds, passing the cluttered desk, reflecting in the dirty screen of a monitor, and then grasping desperately on the edge of the bed, still hiding in shadows. Chloe opened her eyes and then squeezed them back immediately, blinded by the new day and finding herself more or less freezing. The heaters hadn’t warmed up yet as modern technology shared the blue rebel’s preference to wake up late. She shifted a little noticing that Rachel was still sleeping on her chest, murmuring something indistinctly and holding onto her girl’s shirt as if her life was depending on it. Whatever her wife was dreaming of, it had to be intense but not necessarily bad. The nightmares didn’t bother the blonde angel very often recently and Chloe liked to think it was to her merit.

A lonely crow squawked outside, singing a typical winter morning song and his fellow winged bandmates followed him quickly, filling the dry and cold silence with their cry of hunger. Squawk, squawk, they repeated circling around in excitement. Squawk, squawk. Damn, right, you bandits. When Chloe was a kid she hated this sound of birds calling each other in those rough, abrasive screams, as it was the first thing that punctured the pillow of silence and slapped out her sleep. It usually meant it was time to get up, get ready, abandon the warm and comfy slumbers and face the unforgiving, icy world outside. It wasn’t even about school itself, since she had enjoyed her classes then, but the drastic change. Chloe didn’t like changes, hated them with a passion, both positive and negative ones equally, unable to make any radical adjustment. Perhaps it was lack of trust or just a fault in nature, that was how she was built and created, favoring to keep her world as it was, even if it was a shithole.

The birds’ chatter got louder, but not as vexed as years ago when her dad abruptly couldn’t warm up the day with his patient smile, the kitchen downstairs had become too empty, and the hallway dreadfully quiet. The first few months after he had passed away, all she had wanted was to stay in her bed and keep falling asleep, even if drifting into a dream was a hardship. Every sound was waking her up, every crack of the floor, every rustle of flapping wings, not to mention the arguments in crow language. Her life had changed into one long nap, with some breaks for necessary and pointless activities. Nightmare, commercial break, a horror story, nightmare again, on and off screen. Squawk, squawk. The old comrades of dark thoughts had gotten muffled though, not entirely disappearing, but were not impacting the present. All of a sudden, the present felt just too freaking good. The morning song sounded differently now, when she listened to it with a blonde head on her chest and an additional chorus of calm and steady breaths. She didn’t even mind the cold.

And it was Christmas. That too. Squawk, squawk.

Chloe slowly lifted herself up to sit but cautious enough not to wake Rachel. Her girl, still clinging to her, was forcing a simple move to change into a careful operation divided into small stretches, shifts and turns. The blue pirate smiled lightly kissing the blonde temple. Rachel, so innocent and venerable in her sleep, seemed significantly different from the seductive and possessive lioness who passed out by her side last night. The first time when they had woken up like this Chloe couldn’t believe her own eyes, nervous and panicking the hell out that it was just part of a game or that she...
had still been dreaming. Acceptance of the view didn’t cost much now and was worth another kiss to
the blonde head.

It was worth thousands of them.

Christmas morning was the best alarm clock in the world, always opening her eyes early, even if
there had been a time when holidays weren’t rich with joy or amusement. Old habits die hard and
now Chloe was damn content she kept up with her custom, enjoying the freshness of the moment
and watching her girl in awe. Rachel sighed quietly but was still dreaming, not noticing she was
covered carefully with another blanket to shield her from the morning freeze. Thankfully they didn’t
fall asleep naked, otherwise a sore throat and annoying cold shivers would be in order.

Playing with the blonde locks and caressing her shoulders in silence, Chloe didn’t hear the door to
her room slowly getting open. Joyce walked in, carrying a tray filled with mugs and plates,
miraculously not making a single sound and then gracefully strolled towards the bed, noticing gladly
that she hadn’t interrupted any special celebration. She still felt uneasy when entering their space but
hoped this time they wouldn’t mind. Her daughter looked surprised but didn’t stop holding her girl
closely and just nodded with a slight, shy smile hoping for a warm word not a cold disapproval.

The wooden floor panels cracked lightly, as Joyce put the tray on the night stand, finding just enough
space between the books, magazines and totally random garbage. Yet another thing she learned as a
waitress and got pretty handy when it came to placing anything in Chloe’s room. The plates jingled a
little, but the noise disappeared between the crows’ yell outside.

“I have some hot cocoa for you both and gingerbread pancakes.” She whispered rubbing her hands
in an apron and watching them both intently. “I thought you might like to introduce Rachel to one of
our traditions.”

Chloe nodded again as her smile got way broader. The custom almost got forgotten in the previous
years, especially when it came to that kind of delivery. It felt fitting though, felt like the next step and
that made the blue rebel oddly speechless. She looked at her girl again wondering what she would
make of it, but shielding her dreams was more important. Rachel moved a little but still didn’t wake
up though, snuggling deeper into the blue arms and burying herself under the pirate blanket. Sneaky
and convenient though, no reaction needed.

Joyce straightened up, smirking. When William had bought those sheets for their little adventurous
teen she wouldn’t have suspected to find her daughter’s wife wrapped in them a few years later. The
silly pattern of skulls and pirate ships draping both of the girls was somehow surreal, as the two
paintings of adulthood and childhood combined.

The blue eyes peered under the tangled mane of hair.

“Thank you, mom.” Chloe whispered back.

“There is some mail for you.” Joyce slowly retraced to the door, carefully stepping on the
treacherous floor boards. Every move was tricky. “I left it downstairs, but I think you would like to
open it before David starts to clean up the counter. You know how he is with some random papers
laying around. Don’t you smoke.” She warned in a commanding whisper, seeing Chloe reaching for
a pack of Marlboro and lighter. “You will wake her up.” Joyce added, and then turned around
quietly and closed the door behind her, leaving her daughter baffled with her hand frozen in a
stopped movement.
She was sitting in her beloved armchair, surrounded by her favorite books and wrapped in her mom’s scarf that still smelled like her. Her old desk, her bookshelf, her own bed that felt like somebody else’s. Familiar scents no longer familiar. The photographs carefully framed and placed on the walls reminded her of the taciturn and calculated adolescence when everything had been no-touch and look-only and questioning the order was forbidden and illicit. An order, or rather a disruptive chaos, even if everything was always in place, perfectly located and positioned.

The cookies and glass of milk weren’t here but she wanted to unpack her gifts alone. She liked loneliness, got used to it becoming a perfect product of her environment, tangled between estranged parents and mapping her way through their own misleads. The house was warmed up by the heaters, but still seemed cold and uncaring. Just a house though, not a home. Max didn’t sleep well last night, not only because Steph was making herself more comfortable in her mind with every passing thought, but because she was suffering from the distant benevolence surrounding her through the frozen glass of the framed pictures. Even with her mom and dad finally together, she felt more homeless than ever, waking over and over in sweat puddles and trying to find her space between the blankets. When you offer a homeless person a bed, they would sleep on the floor instead not able to find their way around in the most comfortable pillows.

She sat most of her night in her armchair then.

“Max, are you up? We are waiting for you, pumpkin!” She heard her mom yelling from downstairs. Vanessa Caufield sounded cheerful, perhaps to atone for her previous parental mistakes, or it was just the little freckle’s mind always playing the grim card and suspecting the worst. Well, it was still better than inaudible arguments that Max wasn’t supposed to hear, the ultimate tension that was never breaking down or a silent act that everything was just fine.

Her parents cared though. They really did. Really. But it didn’t make her feel less out of place.

The first gift was from Chloe. Her friend had no talents in wrapping stuff up though, so there was no guilt attached with ripping the package off. A mixtape with a few songs from their past, with a self-made cover of doodles and funny expressions. The blue pirate in her prime couldn’t offer her anything more valuable. Max smiled and carefully put the CD by her side. The next one was from Rachel. Rachel Amber.

A notebook. A place for unruly thoughts, ready to handle the stream of self-unconscious babble. A stock of empty sheets of paper gathered between a leather hardcover with a painting of a doe in front. A very specific doe though. The animal had its eyes wide open and willing to run away at any moment, followed by a tiny, blue butterfly also visible in the picture’s corner. Max shivered. A touch of a different life, a silent kiss of a déjà vu. Perhaps Rachel Price, not Amber anymore, knew more than she wanted to show? Riddles were a game two could play after all.

“Pumpkin?” Her mom was just by the door, ready to come in, but no knocking occurred.

Max covered the gifts with her blanket, getting up and trying to remember how to smile. The harsh sleepless night was over. It was time for a semi-awake day and the waterfall of more or less fake joy.

“I’m coming, mom. Just a second.”
Stupid. The garlands of flashing lights hung on the slim, slender trees almost breaking the tormented branches. The decorated windows of stores with their doors locked down and their insides empty and dull. Holiday songs played from the big speakers on every corner without anybody enjoying them, disturbing the white, fluffy silence. A street seldom walked through by any pedestrian, inhabited by the sign of celebration addressing literally no one. Stupid. Silly. Unnecessary. She should get back home.

Kris was late anyway. Nothing would come out of it. It was just a prank, a tease, a test of her courage, or whatever the fuck her ex liked to call it. She wasn’t as important to meet her on time. Nothing between them was. Jingle bells, jingle bells, Kris could go fuck herself. Literally. Although Steph had to stay and freeze her ass off even for the whole morning if needed. She had to know even if it cost her another stupid quarrel with her parents who couldn’t understand what was so urgent to leave them alone just after unpacking a few gifts. Steph didn’t even remember what she found under the tree. Some music stuff, some books, something that she forgot about as soon as the main door closed behind her. Funny, right? Ditching the whole celebration for a painful memory and no hope. That was who Kris was though. Just a recall of quite a few good and a lot of painful times. Mostly the latter.

She wouldn’t come. She wouldn’t. The Prescotts would keep her hostage for another day, month, year, talking her out of it, convince, play with her free will and her mind. Damn family of liars, poisonous snakes that destroy each other as easily as the others. They probably celebrated big too, with servants and feasts, gifting each other with car keys and expensive trips, not because they wanted to, but were obligated. Kris was part of this scheme though. She had always been.

She wouldn’t come.

And then Steph spotted her.

Kris crossed the street in a rush, coming closer, becoming more visible, more real. Not a dream anymore, not just a text and a reply, a letter versus letter. Icon. Colon. Parenthesis. Steph held her breath not knowing what to do with herself. Run, escape, elope, but her feet were as frozen as the quiet, white word around them. The collateral damage was already done though, so she turned the kill switch to her instinct, waiting for her to approach.

Kris was here.

“You didn’t change a bit.” Her inner voice spoke before Steph noticed her lips moving.

“You did.” Her voice. Jesus Christ, Steph almost forgot her voice. A little bit raspy, always with a hidden tease, rough but sweet, balancing between flirtatious and reasonable. “A lot. In a very good, interesting way.”

Her ex- girlfriend, very charming and still stunning first love made an attempt of a hug, then kind of reached for her hand, but since Steph reminded paralyzed, the gestures became just a peculiar, silent theatre. It wasn’t exactly the warm welcome Gandalf the gay had in mind, since she was doubting this meeting would take place in general but couldn’t do anything more than look. Watch. Observe. Stupid.

“Look at yourself.” She murmured.
“I’m done with looking only at myself. It’s boring after a while.” Kris winked, trying to keep this conversation as casual as she could. She was damn nervous too, couldn’t sleep the whole night, keeping herself busy with the worst reruns of old tv shows ever created. Steph didn’t have to know that though. Yet. Or never. “And before it can become even more awkward, would you let me to treat you with a good piece of cake?”

The offer came so naturally, that she agreed almost instantly. Surpassing her nod, Steph frowned a little and looked at her shoes, now covered in the white, sticky thing called snow.

“Like a date?”

“If you want to call it that, sure.” Kris responded lightly and took cover in her own scarf, obstructing her confusion. She was always damn good at hiding stuff, including her fluster, blush and painful smirks. Some things never changed though. Some lessons never got forgotten, so she knew exactly how puzzled the famous Prescott’s daughter had to be.

Steph didn’t want to call it a date though. She didn’t want to give this meeting any term, other than an obligation. Even accepting the fact that she was indeed here was an adversity, a self-made torment. Standing here. In front. Of her. In the middle of a snowy street, between one Christmas decoration and another snowman, with her hands in her pockets and her beanie almost covering her eyes.

“You are not making it easier, Kris.”

“I offered a piece of cake.” The girl smiled, but her eyes remained cold with a mark of curiosity and strange, weird sadness. “How hard could it be?”

***

Santa Claus, or rather Santa Price got gracious this year, spreading his love all around the room. A pile of colorful boxes of different shapes and sizes flooded the floor, the front of the fireplace, even the couch and coffee table, bitten by the pine branches of the decorated tree. Between the glass balls, paper drawings, ceramic ornaments and paper stars, tons of joy and surprises were awaiting to be discovered and adored in one of the oldest rituals of them all. A tradition that wasn’t an unquestionable custom in this house and that made it even more extraordinary.

Joyce wanted them to eat breakfast first, but they survived only a couple of minutes with the coffee and pancakes, especially that the girls had already eaten, and David was surprisingly full, stealing some bits and pieces between the preparations. Ultimately, Chloe’s mom gave up, letting them to leave the table with a fast and rapid rumor of the moved chairs and allowing the fun to begin, secretly excited as much as the rest of the family. They would spend enough time by this table in the next few days, gaining a few pounds and devouring all the delicious treats. The meal, even if impressive, didn’t get enough attention and praise anyway.

Rachel noticed that all the cookies were eaten and the milk got drunken fully. Whoever was pretending to be Santa this year seemed to be pretty hungry this morning or really liked sweets. The appetite didn’t affect the old guy’s good manners, since the letter with greetings and formal appreciations was left by the empty plate. She grabbed the paper wondering who had gone through all this effort for the group of people who believed in Santa as much as conspiracy theories about the flat earth. On the other hand, who knew what David was into.
“You misspelled delicious.” She said to Chloe, who was diving between the pine branches trying to find the gifts addressed to her. The handwriting was different and a little bit choppy, but the blue pirate was the first on the list of suspects.

“It’s not me, I swear!” Her wife responded, hissing quickly when nibbled by the pine needles. It was hard for her to unpack anything with a coffee mug in one hand and the pancake in the other. “I spent the whole night with my hand on your ass. You would’ve noticed if I had sunk out.”

“So, who the hell ate all the cookies?”

“Santa probably. Now we know why he is such a fat fuck.” Chloe swallowed the last piece of her treat and gestured toward the pile of presents. “Shall we?”

At first they were slow, waiting for every family member to unwrap each package and comment on the gift before another one was hunted down and handed to the proper owner. Then they lost patience, grabbing box after box, until every last one of the gifts reminded untouched. Joyce got a knitting kit, a music CD, a new radio to for her car, two different fragrances, a few pieces of clothing, and a book with some wise quotes. She welcomed every gift with gasps and repeating that they didn’t really have to, or it was way too much, keeping on opening more to the point that she finally got silent. David found himself a new owner of a fishing pole, which was hardly a surprise since the shape of the gift revealed its content before it got unpacked. Claiming that was exactly the one he had always wanted he also discovered a new toolbox, a pack of shirts, ties, just as if he was wearing them every day, stuff to keep a guy clean, like shaving and stuff, a leather belt, and a new, more complicated lock to his gun cabinet. Rachel winked and grinned, guilty of this particular purchase and still grateful that David didn’t start hell, when his Remington appeared in its place, cleaned and polished but a few weeks later than was promised. Chloe, noticing that this present was hijacking her free access to any of her step-father’s treasures, wasn’t as happy but since David and she had buried the hatchet some time ago, she mumbled and chewed on her snarky comment. It was for the best though, or so Rachel thought. The blue pirate blinked when she found a huge sweater with a cute, blue bear on the front and was really close to kill her wife with her bare hands, but decided to punish her only with a few, short kisses. Santa Price had a sense of humor, what a surprise. Yeah, sure she wore it anyway. The things you do to entertain your cruel family. Great. A pack of boxers made her blush, especially when David was damn sure that this gift belonged to him.

“Nah, it’s Chloe’s.” Rachel pursed her lips and the step-douche retracted quickly, quite afraid to say anything more or even ask questions. Her blue treasure also discovered a new stereo-system with huge speakers that if cranked to the max could crumble this house’s foundations. Her dad’s CD player was sort of dying lately anyway, so it was time for an improvement. Kinda sad, but look at this beauty. Joyce sighed deeply knowing that their room would be surrounded by a wall of sound soon enough, and she should really invest in new earplugs.

Earplugs became essential for Chloe’s mother’s peaceful sleep anyway.

A knife and pepper spray had to be gifts from David, but he would never admit it under the watchful gaze of his concerned wife. Well, Chloe had a tendency of getting into trouble, so she should be able to protect herself. Legally. It was too soon for a gun, but maybe one day… There was also a new backpack, a new zippo to her small collection and a huge, blue… suitcase.

“Are we going somewhere?” She asked Rachel.

“‘To the other side of the country.” Her girl responded. “Did you already forget?” And got back to her own gifts before Joyce or David would start asking questions.

Rachel got an autographed Firewalk CD with a special, personal dedication, a few photo albums, a
Taylor Swift record since Chloe knew she secretly liked her even if she would never admit it, a shitload of makeup stuff that was carefully selected to match her taste and linking, a sweater that was supposed to be ugly but came out to be sort of cute, and a DVD set with Shakespeare plays. She thanked all of them, hugging first Joyce, then David and disappearing in Chloe’s arms for a long while.

“Merry Christmas, sunshine.”

“Uh, shut up.” She murmured and pulled Chloe closer not willing to show everybody how emotional she got. They would understand though, but Rachel preferred to share her secret tears only with her own private pirate. That was their tradition.

Then the family dinner happened, interrupted by a few calls from the distant kin, but Joyce’s effort got appreciated fully this time and no one stood up before asking for seconds even if in danger of not being able to get up at all. The clangs of plates changed into a buzz of chit-chat, then died in the silence of the full stomachs and silent regret of eating way too much. First David, then Joyce left the table, cleaning a little, followed by the girls who barely could move, and the family spread around the living room, partly talking, partly lurking at a broadcast of a holiday parade.

“I can’t believe you bought me boxers.” Chloe caught Rachel in the hallway, still holding the pack of her underwear and dressed in the ridiculous sweater that despite of its front was pretty warm and cozy. Her image of a bad girl was irrevocably lost; however, the blue teddy bear didn’t seem worried about it at all. The boxers on the other hand were more concerning.

“This joke with socks and underwear got old. Now you have to suffer the consequences.” Rachel kissed her quickly. “With style.”

“Did you ask Victoria to help you out or something?” The blue pirate looked at the printed logo feeling even more uneasy. It was a pretty cool gift and she wouldn’t mind wearing those, especially with a promise of them being taken off later, but got uneasy thinking about the tag price of those. Rachel really wanted her to have the best things and shit and it was like weird and concerning and too much. Like really. Her girl here was enough, but Rachel Price would never accept any kind of plea of not spending money on the people she loved or adored.

“It’s Armani not some Dolce and Banana. You wanna be a stud, here are some props for it.”

Chloe stood there in front of her, crumpling the pack of boxes in her hands, with her head low and eyesight covered by the blue curtain of hair. The little bear on her sweater seemed almost as lost as her but not even half that adorable. Rachel kissed her quickly and wanted to get back to the living room but got stopped by a very small and shy move.

“Thank you.” She heard the blue whisper.

“For your underwear?”

Her girl shook her head.

“No.” She choked and grimaced trying not to get all touchy-feely. Tearing up because of boxers was so stupid. For real. Like the fuck she even felt that way. Shit. “For you being you. Being with me. Being with us. For everything. And the ring and the smile and the blush and…” She tried to shrug, but even her own arms didn’t want to listen.

“What got into you?” Rachel asked softly.

“Christmas spirit?” Chloe sniffled.
“That’s why you’re tearing up, you badass?” Thankfully, her girl saved the bold pirate before she melted down in the middle of the hallway, hugging her close and rocking her in her arms. “Hey, baby. It’s ok. I’m here. It’s fine.”

“Do you like it? Christmas here?” Chloe mumbled to the blonde neck. “It’s not like Aspen and stuff.”

“Are you starting again?” Rachel chuckled. “Aspen is pretty depressing though, so formal and luxurious but not really cozy. This is the best Christmas in my life actually. With the woman I love, with my family. With you.” Then she noticed that Chloe’s hands were shaking. “Baby? Hey?”

William’s smirk when she was opening the presents. His laugh when Joyce was ordering them around. Him scoffing and joking when trimming the tree, decorating it with some silly things, sometimes made out of paper in the last minute. Him snickering lightly when her mom found out she unpacked her gifts earlier. Him telling her that Santa Claus didn’t exist and that he was serving proudly also as the Easter bunny, Tooth Fairy and everybody else and if she really wanted something she could just ask, and he would give her everything she needed or craved for.

Everything.

His voice, his smile, even his face was disappearing slowly in the hazel, patient sight, in one tender touch of her wife’s embrace. It was going away, and Chloe didn’t want to let it go, desperate to preserve it but had to make a space, like room for the new things and it was painful and wonderful, and scary and amazing at the same time. And she didn’t know what to do or what to feel and…

“It’s the best Christmas for me too.” She whispered, squeezing her girl so tightly that Rachel had a problem to take a deep breath. She understood though, caught her before falling, letting to hide, to sob a little in those small, tiny arms. She didn’t say a word that her favorite, carefully picked shirt was getting wet, stroking the blue back and comforting her treasure, even if her own throat was getting desert dry.

“I love you.” It was the only thing that Rachel could say to not fall apart to pieces.

“I love you more.”

“It’s not a freaking contest, you dork.” Grateful for the hallway’s darkness she stole a long kiss, and then another. “I really fucking love you, you know?” Rachel smiled weakly wiping away the tears from her girl’s cheeks. Pirates didn’t cry though, except this one, the most beloved and sensitive as hell. “I really do. With all my heart.” And she sobbed too without any particular reason because crying in Christmas was some kind of American tradition or some shit and she couldn’t stop herself.

“Chloe, are you gonna open your mail this week or should I just trash it?” Joyce’s sharp command forced them to step back from each other.

“Uh, alright, fine.” The post office ruined Chloe’s tender moment. Grumpily, she wiped off her face and walked to her mom to pick up the presented, fat envelope. “Give me that.”

“Did she order another catalogue?” David peered at them from the couch but wasn’t keen on standing up or leaving his occupied fortress. This place was taken and would remain in his possession for the rest of the evening. “Chloe, I told you a million times I have free subscriptions for all of them! Don’t you waste your money like that!”

Chloe rolled her eyes, opening the letter. She didn’t order anything, quite short with cash recently and had no idea what this thing was about. Probably some special holiday offer, stack of Bed, Bath
and Beyond coupons or similar shit. Some flyers and brochures fell off and almost landed on the floor, but she caught them in the last second, noticing an additional, formal letter with her name and address at the top. With a deep and impatient sigh, she unfolded it and started reading, hoping to be done with it as quickly as possible. One sentence, second, five words, ten more.

And then she froze.

“What?” Rachel was the first to notice the change. “What’s wrong baby?”

The blue tension turned the paper on the other side, then back, then started reading again. She shook a little and grasped on the kitchen counter to keep her fragile balance. The rest of the envelope, including brochures and other colorful prints were slipping through her fingers. Everything was slipping though, she got nauseous, hot, dizzy, then cold, reading it over and over and over again.

“Oh, fuck.”

“What happened?” Joyce came closer.

“I… am… I” Chloe tried to explain, waving with the letter but not keen on passing it to her mother. “I got it. I got in. I’m not even waitlisted.”

“Got in?” Joyce repeated, seriously concerned about her daughter hyperventilating.

“MIT. They accepted… my early… admission. And scholarship… And…”

She was one step from fainting when Rachel jumped to her, screaming in excitement, pulling the piece of paper from the blue fingers and reading it by herself. The message almost got ripped in the process though, but it was just a joke, right? Just a freaking prank or something so it didn’t matter.

“Holy shit! I told you! I freaking told you!” A deep, rough kiss occurred despite of Joyce being a few feet away. “My baby. My Chloe. I’m so proud.”

“Got where?” David asked, reluctantly getting up from the couch. Unfortunately, his step-daughter might need to rest on it more than him. She was pale as a wall and had a problem with steady breathing. He had never seen her that agitated. The hell was going on?

“College.” Rachel informed proudly, letting Chloe to lean on her, since the blue pirate was still shaking. Who would’ve known that an admission to that sort of institution would make such an effect on the rebel, who never cared much about school.

“College?” Joyce blinked almost dropping the coffee pot. “My daughter is going to college?”

David picked up the letter and started reading.

“According to this it’s on the other side of the country. In Boston. And it’s probably the best and most expensive one.” He rumbled reading quickly and smoothing the paper. “Then again, this little soldier got a free ride.”

“A free ride?” Chloe’s mother tried to find a surface for the empty vessel but was hard to find her way around in the familiar kitchen. She put the pot on the counter, then grabbed it back, holding onto it desperately shocked almost as much as her daughter. Was that a prank? A mockery? If so, Rachel also got fooled. What was Chloe up to?

“I just applied. I don’t know how it happened. I didn’t want to say anything in case…” The blue rebel cleared her throat scratching her teddy bear sweater and not letting her wife go. “Anyway, they
can still expel me.”

The hazel eyes sparkled in a very dangerous way.

“Over my dead body. Over my dead fucking body.”

***

The TVs around the bar silently attracted with “It’s a beautiful Life” movie, a black and white classic, displayed mercifully without a sound. No carols or holiday songs were played though, since the staff knew that whoever wandered to an open café in Christmas day, was trying to escape a festive atmosphere, not to sink in it. Most of the tables were empty, just a few isolated figures spread around, like lonely chees pieces on the board by the end of the game. The frost vaporized through their breath changing into steamy, cozy warmth as they all hunched over their meals, prolonging every bite. The secluded human chimneys were served by two patient waitresses wandered between the tables and communicating only through whispers.

“I didn’t know.” Kris hadn’t tried her cherry pie yet, slicing it in small, even pieces warily trying to cut the fruits in half without knocking them down or mutilating them much. “And even if I knew I couldn’t do anything. My father signed me up for voluntary exile and that was it. My bags were packed and searched. My phone was taken away. I felt like a criminal already and then… a few days later I landed in Brazil and I had no idea how to contact you. Not that I would risk it.”

“Risk it? Risk what?”

She looked at Steph and took the first bite. The cake was so good, freshly baked specially for that day. Kris expected it to be outdated and chewy, but somebody at this little café really wanted to make their customers felt welcomed and satisfied. It was worth a delightful smile.

“Risk your well-being, not mine. Mine too, but I was already screwed. There was a certain price my father would force you to pay if I got in touch with you.” Another bite, this time without a smirk. “I didn’t want you to pay that price.”

“Price? What are you talking about?” Steph frowned with her plate still untouched. She played with the fork a little, afraid to feed on the glorious treat, just in case she would have to say something, react in the right moment. It would be hard with her mouth full. “I was just a kid.”

Kris licked her lips discreetly and reached for the napkin.

“You were just a deadly temptation for his daughter, not really just a kid. You could start a tantrum and if my father is afraid of something, it’s noise. And scandals.” She paused watching her for a second too long then getting back to the cake. Cherries could be messy, staining her shirt forever. Easting it piece by piece required patience and skill. “Well, alright, he wanted to expel you, mess with your records, fuck up your future. Even pull some strings to punish your family, finding some dirt on your dad. You know how my father operates. Most of it was just talk though, but I was scared he might actually do it. It took me years to get my shit together and finally reach out to you.”

The grey face of James Steward grinned at them from every TV corner. Avoiding lurking at the screens, Steph finally tried her dessert. Kris didn’t lie, it was indeed very tasty. So delicious she wanted to eat one more piece and stop talking for a while. It was her turn to say something though, the gap of silence was wisely created just for her.
“Sorry I didn’t respond faster.”

“No, I get it.” Kris looked through the window at the unknown, snowy street, sleepy, empty and frozen. She didn’t know this town very well, never visited before. Hanging out in Arcadia was way too risky, they had to drive an hour to find a secluded, safe and open place. She wondered how this place looked like during the summer. Was it full and cheerful, or forgotten by the tourists and locals equally hoping to stay in business for another day, month, year, with the bills half-paid? “I’m sorry you had to go through all this abuse. It was so unfair, and I wish I could’ve stopped it somehow, but my hands were tied. My family can be dangerous, maybe not in a deadly sense but even if they wouldn’t bury you down on some garbage mountain, it doesn’t mean they can’t just bury you alive.” Their gazes met and they both turned their heads quickly to break off the eye contact. “And they did it to me.”

Steph nailed a piece of cake, turned the fork in her hand and put it back on the plate. There was not much to say, not many confessions to make. Sure, she went through a horror, crying her eyes out, asking people around, begging for a scrap of info, but at some point, it was just too much, so Gandalf the gay had found a huge, mind eraser and just removed all the wicked reminiscences, all this fucking pain with one simple method. Not thinking. Being busy. Not being hers.

All her recollections were one big blurry mess though. Everything got fucked up again.

“I was looking for you. For months.” The decision to share a bit came naturally, even if not needed. She couldn’t say anything that Kris wasn’t aware of. “I didn’t know what happened to you. I was fucking scared that… That somebody hurt you.”

“I know. I mean, I suspected.” Here came the confirmation. That’s why Steph always hated those deep, insightful talks. Useless misery. Kris shook her head. “It was so messed up. I couldn’t leave, couldn’t run away and was permitted to contact only my family members. Prescotts’ charm. So, I spent a few years in the jungle, doing research…”

“You always wanted to do research though. And take photos…”

“Yeah, I could do both. Full facility at my disposal, a team of experienced scientists helping me and teaching me stuff. What else could I ask for? Dreams can come true, right?” When Kris was a teenager, she begged her father for a trip to South America, fascinated by the rain forests and very engaged in ecological protests. When he had sent her away, at least he respected her wishes hoping it would keep her quiet and busy. Kris didn’t give up without a fight though but accepted the bribe. It would be silly to waste this chance, even if taking it felt like a treason. “It wasn’t easy to focus after what happened. Nothing was easy, but you know the drill though. You went through the same thing.”

“Not in the jungle.” Steph responded quietly.

“In Arcadia’s jungle. Same thing, just colder.”

They leaned back in their seats almost in the same moment. The end credits of the movie got cut off and the TVs started playing the movie from the very beginning. The waitresses, bored to death, took a break sitting by their own table waiting for the customers to make a profound choice between key lime pie and chocolate cake. Tea or Coffee. For some, those decisions weren’t as small and insignificant though.

James Steward appeared on the screen again.

“So, any sexy girlfriends?” Steph asked, to her own surprise and then blushed quickly. Kris expected
The rain forest is not a perfect dating site so even if I wanted to, I didn’t have many opportunities. Well, ok.” She rolled her eyes. “I had one, but it didn’t last long. I was paranoid that my father would learn about it and send me to the Arctic or wherever else. So, I just focused on my work. Work can help you to forget… Things. When he noticed that I was actually succeeding in my research he allowed me to come back. I’m talking too much.” She paused at the high peak of her speech and exhaled slowly. “I don’t even know if you want to listen to all the weird secrets…”

“Actually, I do.” Steph winced remembering the uneasy game of riddles, a labyrinth of half-truth that she had wandered through trying to fix things with Max. Being direct and straight forward had never been appreciated more. “I’d love to have the full story, not just bits and pieces.”

“I’m sorry, Steph. I’m really sorry it ended like that.” Kris finished her cake and watered it down with a glass of water. She always liked cold, frozen drinks in the middle of winter, like her inner fire was too strong to control.

Maybe it was. Steph enjoyed her hot beverage served in bigger mugs, not as transparent as glasses. It was easier to cover her fluster taking a sip.

“Not your fault. Nobody’s fault. But your brother…” It wasn’t a good time to mention Nathan’s crimes though, so Steph quickly backed off. “He is a real asshole.”

“He is but he also has a softer side that he hides from everybody. It’s not easy to get there.”

“I’m not up for this expedition.”

“I’m not gonna ask you for it. Nathan is my problem… my brother and I will try to talk some sense into him. We’ve always had this special connection and he is the only person I can really trust. I hope we can rebuild it and I will be able to help him, convince him somehow… I really worry about him though. You might…”

“…Not understand it?”

That was unfair and childish. Kris had always treated her as an equal, even if the age difference between them was way more significant three years ago than now.

“On the contrary. I think you understand it better than anybody else. I wanted to say you might prefer to think about him as a lost cause, but I can’t. I’m done with giving up on lost causes, and if I learned something in that jungle, it was that no cause is really lost until we decide so.”

So unaware of her own brother’s faults, Kris still wanted to protect him. It was him who ratted them out, who told his father about their affair begging for attention and a friendly pat on the back. It was Nathan who started the series of unfortunate events, putting his own sister through a misery at the other side of the world, and threatening Steph directly and through his buddies to keep her away. She was bullied, threatened, embarrassed and humiliated so many times that she lost count. It was Kris’s beloved, sweet, troubled brother who just needed a helpful hand, a kind word and everything would be just picture-perfect. And his rational, logical thinking sister still had no idea that the betrayal happened just under her nose.

“Nathan is not stable, Kris. He is obsessed with weird shit, he…” Steph wasn’t sure why she wanted to keep this information a secret. Shouldn’t Kris know after all? Shouldn’t they just clear up the air and put all the cards on the table before the table itself would turn around? “He really needs help.” She said simply.
“To get help you have to accept the need for it first.” Kris was completely oblivious or wanted to be. One and the same. “People in need are the weak chains in my father’s eyes. They are not worthy. They’re trash. I can’t let him drown just like I was drowning. If somebody can help him it has be me. He was the only one who didn’t give up on me when I was sent away. I have to at least try.”

Noble. This girl, this woman was always damn noble. So that was why Kris decided to come back then. It wasn’t about Steph, but a rescue mission. A forgotten princess claiming her throne and saving her dear brother from himself. Nice tale. The DND queen couldn’t picture herself playing any role in this story. Not her campaign, not her circus. Not anymore.

“Yeah well, I wish you all the best. Just be careful.” If Kris hoped her ex-girlfriend would help with this quest, she had to be damn disappointed. She was still able to ask for a lot from Steph, but any contacts with this demented lunatic were out of the question.

“He’s my brother, there is nothing I have to be careful about.” Kris responded and then she switched to an entirely different topic. “He told me about you and Max. Max Caulfield.”

That took Steph aback.

“Yeah.” She confirmed. Nathan was as well informed about her love life as the whole school, especially since Victoria Chase was more or less her neighbor. Kris asking around about Max and their breakup felt wrong and nice at the same time though. First, she could’ve asked Steph herself, not her fucked up brother. Second, it was kinda neat that she expressed interest in that field. Kinda. Sort of. Probably.

“Is it still going on?” Kris asked.

This time the answer took Steph a moment. It was a very good question, with two different answers. Formally, yes, Max was still her partner. Practically, they hadn’t spoken in months so no one sane would consider them a couple. The problem was that Steph wasn’t really sane when it came to relationships. Exhibit A, she didn’t know how to answer the question. Exhibit B, she was sitting here with Kris for crying out loud, chatting and hoping for some new beginning. Or just hoping, period.

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t want to be part of something… unclear.” Kris’s glass of water got empty. One of the waitresses woke up from her dormant state and quickly rushed to the table to fill it up. Any bit of work was better than this constant boredom. “Or cause something bad.” Her ex’s words drowned in the sound of a waterfall of pouring water.

Steph shook her head slightly still staring at her.

“Cause what?”

“A payback? Revenge? Sleepless nights?” This water had to taste better than the cherry pie, or Kris was on a personal quest to freeze herself inside. “I had my decent share of misery in life and I really don’t like pass it on in any form.”

“That’s pretty gallant. And fair.” False hope wasn’t Steph’s favorite sport though. Being direct and straight-forward played both ways. “What are you playing, Kris? You want to start something, like…”

“Like what?”

Steph’s small world was filled with dragons, knights, paladins, wizards and fantastic adventures,
closed in her mind and directed by the swing of dice. Those tales were simple, very predictable, even if she liked to twist the story and surprise her players, the goal among the possible ending was very clear. There was always the bad guy to defend, a throne to claim or a girl to win. And rules. Books of rules she didn’t differentiate from without outlining the alterations beforehand. Cozy and comfortable in her own universe she shared with only a few, Steph had dared to give it up for one, freaking adorable freckle. A girl, who rebuilt her life and changed into a dark and difficult maze of riddles. A girl, whom she didn’t end things with formally even if she was aware that this campaign was over. Whatever was awaiting Steph next, she was insisting with every single fiber of her being on one rule. Only one.

No riddles.

“You know what I’m talking about.” She looked at Kris “What are you trying to do? With me? To me?”

“We are just having a coffee and cake.” Kris moved away a bit, presenting an innocent, cute smile. Steph knew that smile.

“Yeah, and you’re asking me if I’m single.”

“It’s just a question.”

Just a question. Steph pursed her lips and started to trace the shape of the mug’s handle. Up and down, back and forth, absorbing its shape and curviness. It was just a question, nothing big, nothing significant, just a simple expression of interest from a former friend, who just so happened to be a former lover as well. Yeah, sure. There were no ‘justs’ with Kris, no silly queries thrown in the air for the sake of keeping the conversation going. The good thing was that Steph had nothing to hide. Nothing at all.

“To be honest, I don’t know. Max and I… we’ve been together for some time. I moved out and now it’s pretty complicated.” She summarized quickly.

“It’s always complicated. The privilege of dating girls.” The frozen glass couldn’t cover Kris’s wild, broad smile. “So, a lost cause?”

Gandalf the gay thought about her phone with all the messages that needed to be replied to, about the room in the dorms still on her name, about the solace of freckles and a warm, shy smile when she was waking up. It was done, gone, a past ready to be erased, but giving it up so easily, confirming it with a shrug or encouraging grin seemed unjust. Kris couldn’t just come back, appear on the horizon, feed her with a cake and a few words of enlightenment, just to play her way back.

“There is no such thing as a lost cause.” She answered slowly and dove back into the cherry pie’s flavor.

***

An abundant family meal, an army quantity of sweets and treats, the constant chatter and the news about college were way too much for Chloe Price. One minute, she was just sitting on the couch and talking to David, and the next her eyelids got heavy, her mouth grimaced in a loud, despicable yawn
and her whole body begged her to lie down. When Rachel came back from the upstairs, ready for a
walk around the neighborhood as promised, she found her wife snoring lightly and crouched
between pillows. There was nothing on earth that would wake up the blue pirate, strong earthquake
or magic tornado included, so the blonde angel smiled calmly, grabbed a blanket and wrapped it
around her cute, adorable and badass girl, letting her rest. A kiss to the forehead also didn’t make any
impression, since Chloe was dead to the world and probably would stay in this state till morning or
for a few hours at least. Rachel sighed, knowing it meant that she would have to sleep alone tonight,
as it happened a few times before, or simply try to squeeze herself by Chloe’s side, which never
worked out.

Cleaning a few things, washing a glass or two, Rachel poured herself a cup of coffee and decided to
smoke one, before heading to the empty and very cold bedroom. Taking her coat, she passed David,
who was sitting by the table falling asleep as well, and walked through the backyard door, getting
some fresh air. Well, fresh to a certain extent, since a cig got lit up as soon as she reached the grill,
checking if the bottle was still there. It was not.


“Would you mind?” She heard Joyce’s voice from behind and turned around instantly. Her mother
in-law pointed at the pack of Marlboro and when getting one of the offered, she accepted with a nod.
“Thank you, Rachel.” She inhaled. “Please, don’t tell David.”

Interesting how mother and daughter asked for the same favor when it came to vice.

“My lips are sealed.” Rachel smiled, suddenly feeling a little bit awkward. It had been months since
she had spoken to Joyce without Chloe around and her breathing the grey cloud in this calm and
prolonged manner could mean only one thing.

Trouble.

“Mine were sealed for too long.” Joyce said with her eyes narrowed. “No, don’t be scared, Rachel.”
She touched her arm seeing a small, nervous twitch. “I don’t want to have another heavy talk about
your duties, but I would like to have a word or two with you. If you don’t mind.” She looked at the
window watching her daughter, calmly sleeping under the Christmas tree, solaced by a blanket and a
blue bear sweater. Chloe murmured something and switched to the other side, getting herself more
comfortable. A certain blue somebody seized the couch for tonight and hadn’t been woken up urged
to join Rachel in bed. A small sacrifice but in Joyce’s eyes it was a game changer. Her daughter
matured a lot, found her happiness, and, on top of everything, was respected by the partner she
loved. One blanket, one gesture of simple care could change so much. She turned to the blonde kid,
not quite fearing what the talk would bring. “I’ve known you since you were just fifteen and I’ve
watched you changing, from a child to a woman, from a hell-raiser to a person I can trust. Really
trust. This whole thing cost you a lot and even if you did good, it wasn’t easy. Don’t argue with me.”
She rose her hand seeing Rachel opening her mouth. “I’ve seen it. I see you two together and how
much you take care of Chloe... How much you both...” She covered her perturbation with a smoke.
“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

Rachel lowered her head, tapping the ash repeatedly and not sure what to do with herself.

“You had the full right not to believe.”

“Perhaps, but my intuition was saying otherwise. I knew you were good kid. I knew you were good
for her, especially after you started to put your life back on track. I’m glad she found you, that we all
found you.” If somebody told Joyce years ago that this troublemaker, the rich and popular DA’s
daughter would become part of their daily lives to that extent, she would either scoff or laugh out
loud. As loudly as the whales in Puget Sound would hear her. Now, there was no other option and not because the girls rushed with some papers a few months ago. “You are part of this family and you will always be, no matter what, you hear me? You’ve been part of it long before you changed your last name. If there is anything I can do for you, you can always ask. Just like you could with your own parents.”

“Thank you. My parents…” The blonde kid’s foot was digging a deep hole in the snow. “They are just… It’s not easy.”

Joyce didn’t really want to talk about the Ambers, sensing what they had been going through and unfortunately couldn’t offer more solace than a few words, perhaps even wise ones. On the other hand, she just offered the girl any help she needed. It would be unfair to avoid the subject.

“I know it’s hard, but they will understand one day, just like David and I did,” she stated.

“They understood.” The blonde kid explained quickly. The fast reaction told Joyce more about Rachel, than the words themselves. The girl really missed them, hoping to patch things up, expecting a fusion with her past and her present. “It’s just difficult.”

Chloe’s mother surrounded her shoulders and started a common walk around the ridiculously small backyard. Those holidays were always making her sentimental, eager to share a few memories and stories from her own past. Rachel could use one or two of those recalls and was willing to listen. Better this than discussing an extensive use of earplugs.

“When William and I got married, our families weren’t really approving. He was a boy from the North, a free spirit, and I dropped out of college when I got pregnant. Not really a good start, let me tell you. My father was livid, my mother was crying and calling William all the names in the book. Even a quick marriage didn’t change their minds. It’s not a surprise I didn’t keep in touch with them very much. I was so done with fighting and arguments that didn’t lead anywhere. I could yell, they could yell back, but no one was willing to change their minds. Being stubborn is in our blood, that’s for sure. We didn’t talk for months and they got back to me only because Chloe was born.”

They reached the fence and turned back, strolling in wide circles.

“That convinced them?” Rachel asked.

“No. They were still stubborn. It’s hard to change somebody’s mind when the grudge went that far. They felt that helping us was their obligation. We had a little baby and it was their Christian duty, but they never fully approved of William. He tried to charm them, fix it as he liked to fix things. I didn’t put that much effort though, thinking it was a lost cause. My parents felt betrayed, especially since we moved to the other side of the country and they were always hoping we would come back South. Oregon was a wicked place in their minds, not the right state to raise a kid. When William passed away, they tried to convince me to move once again. Good that I didn’t listen.”

They felt damn guilty after he died, as it was something they prayed for and it got granted. Joyce’s father changed his mind competently, praising her deceased husband and telling people what an amazing man and great father William was. Her mother remained less enthusiastic, still holding a grudge against her own daughter for abandoning family roots and moving so far away, but tried so hard to rebuild the burnt bridge, learning slowly how to talk to Joyce anew and how to avoid any topic that would start a fight or that chopped a fragile peace between them. Their sudden transformation came too late, or too soon, when Joyce was still in a very dark place, but they remained patient and supportive. When she met David, they accepted him without question, even if they didn’t like her second husband that much. It was still aching, how easily he got their approval, and William, even if he tried for years, had always been disregarded. They didn’t want to make the
same mistake though. They didn’t want to lose her forever.

“Because you got with David?” Another blonde question brought Joyce back to reality.

“And because Chloe… she met you.” She squeezed Rachel’s arm. “Southern lifestyle wouldn’t be
good for her, that’s for sure.”

“Did they… finally approve of William?”

It was impressive how this blonde kid could read people’s minds. Joyce knew that Rachel was
looking for parallels to her own situation, although telling her a story when her parents changed their
minds didn’t seem encouraging. James Amber and his wife didn’t need a tragedy to finally open their
eyes and see things as they were. Hopefully.

“Some things come when you stop hoping they will ever happen. They did accept him. They did
when I didn’t need it or expect it at all. I forgave them in my heart already and they finally found
their way back there. It was a long journey, not very pleasant, but it was worth it. I can tell you now,
it was matter of time, Rachel. Only a matter of time.”

The kid got uneasy. Joyce had never asked her about her complicated relations with her parents but
suspected that there was more to it than the condemnation of the girls’ relationship. James Amber,
even if strict and demanding, was already trying to solve this issue peacefully, giving his daughter as
much freedom as she wanted, paying her bills and not calling often. The disagreement between
Rachel and her dad delved deeper, into a grey, dark and sticky area that Joyce was afraid to ask
about.

They both finished smoking at the same time, marking the snow with two more black holes.

“You think I should forgive my father too?”

“It’s up to you, Rachel.” Joyce responded warily. No advice was better than a wrong one. She had to
be careful. “You can’t force it or force yourself. Although this holy time is always about forgiveness
and finding new hope. I know one thing for sure. Even if your parents are still upset and not happy
about your decisions, they wish you all the best. Like me. And David. They will learn. They will see
what I saw.” She looked at the house, at the tranquilly lit up living room with her daughter still
sleeping between the couch’s pillows. “They are not blind, they just decide to have their eyes shut
and one day they will open them up. Hope is a powerful thing, Rachel. You never know where it
will lead you. You’re doing a good thing here. What you have is good and you will be paid back
with the same. I never expected to have such an amazing and smart daughter and God gave me two.”

“I…” Before Rachel could melt down, a hug came. Sharp, tight, leaving no room for discussion or a
space to sneak out. She tweaked a little but got held in place, as her hair got stroked, then her back
and arms, and the embrace intensified even more.

“So, Boston, huh?” Joyce’s voice was hoarse and broken with a sniffle. “You will take away my
daughter to Boston? To college, so far away from home. It will be so empty without you here.
Without both of you.”

“We will be coming back,” said Rachel still being held tight. Now she knew where Chloe got her
strength from. “As often as we can. I promise.”

“I know, Rachel. I know. And we’ll be always waiting.”
The white van strolled slowly between tall, white pines, with their branches bending over the weight of snow, sometimes tapping the steel roof or spitting at the windshield. One foot, one more and the car got stopped with a loud squeak when Steph pulled the hand break but didn’t turn off the engine ready to take off. They both knew she couldn’t drive up to the main entrance, forced to hide in the white silence between the pines and mounds of snow. The bitter taste of twilight increased the stillness they were sinking in the whole ride to Prescott’s mansion, as their confusion rose as well. An internal fear that this might be the last time they met each other, and external that somebody could see them together. Just like the old times, when every step could end up in a crack of ice.

“Thank you for the ride, Steph.” Kris unbuckled her seat belt, but didn’t open the door yet, trying to steal a few seconds more. The inside of the van got so warm and cozy, well-known and familiar, so different than this bottomless pit of desolated outside. Just a few seconds, five, maybe ten to harvest more memories, sit with her for a moment longer. Setting up this meeting, Kris didn’t expect much. Just a clarification, the speech she prepared in her head for over three years now, to see this girl she loved so much one more time and call it off. Every single string attached was broken and tangled a long time ago, but the Prescott’s favorite daughter had really high hopes to untie them again, patch it up, change something old and dusty to new and beautiful. Start again. Silly. Steph was just a painful memory yesterday, tonight she became a leaving breathing miracle. Flesh, blood, bones, feels.

Kris didn’t remember when she felt more alive than in this old, choking van.

“My pleasure. It was nice… to…” Her former girlfriend was avoiding looking at her like the plague. Every time it happened her speech got broken with some mumbles and gasps. “To…See you. Really nice. When are you going back?” She asked quickly.

Damn, it wasn’t nice.

“Bored with my company, already?” Kris nestled in her seat with no intention to leave the van anytime soon. “I still have to deal with a few things here.”

“Like Nathan.”


“Don’t…” Steph winced, tightening her fingers on the steering wheel. Then she inhaled deeply, closed her eyes and forced herself to speak. “Would you like to stay for New Years’?” So here it was. Gandalf the gay wanted her… here or at least she didn’t mind much. She sought to steal more of the moments that should’ve happened, to maybe imagine how it could be or steal something for good. For the better.

Steph, despite her lack of practice, was a good thief though, even if too honorable sometimes.

“I don’t see why not.” Kris tilted her head in a way that reminded Steph of Rachel. A touch of a dare, nonchalance and unconcern covering the upcoming fluster. “There is not much to do in Florida during this time. Except great weather and partying at the beach the whole night.”

“Oh, who would trade it for Oregon then.” Steph’s hand landed on the hand break. The van moved an inch or two, still purring, slipping its rubber paws on the thick, deep snow. The beaches of the east coast paradise sounded delightful. Too delightful.
“Some people would. I would.” Kris’s hand covered her palm and stayed there. “Too soon?”

It was warm. Nice. Familiar. No, not familiar. It felt like a fine, warm, cozy room that you left years ago and forgot how it smelled inside, but once you passed the doorstep, the space became home again. Was it ok though? Steph had a home already. The foundation was cracked, the walls fractured but it was still standing. Formally. Max. But then Kris was just holding her hand. Just hand. No demands, no Christmas wishes, even if any sense of hope was as heavy as the lumps of snow on the car’s hood. Steph stopped breathing. Kris smiled, or tried to. A wary smirk tensed, frozen apprehensively. For a moment they were just a few inches away from a kiss. Kissing Kris. Again.

Kissing her…

“I don’t know. No.” Steph shook her head. “It’s just… getting back it’s not easy.”

“It’s not about getting back, Steph, but about moving forward, whatever it means. It’s a different time, different circumstances, but still…” The fingers brushed her palm slowly in a detached, withdrawn way. An accident of skin touching skin. “No promises, alright? I will call you tomorrow. Have a great night.” And the door got open, the warmth was gone, and the snow cracked under fast and decisive steps.

Gandalf the gay looked after the dark figure, disappearing slowly in the whiteness of the cold, icy nightfall. The snow intensified, covering Kris’s tracks as soon as they materialized.

“You too.” She whispered and put down the hand break. “If you can.”

When the white van began to move, slowly paving the way though the piles of snow, the window curtains on the second floor of the Prescott mansion moved quickly and stayed cracked open. Nathan watched the car leaving the driveway, wrapped by the drapes, hiding in his own, well lit room. He didn’t have to wonder who this van belonged to.

He knew.

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“Who are you texting with?”

Rachel lifted her head and blinked, trying to find the source of the sweet voice in the dark hallway. The contrast between the white, bright screen and the peaceful, shady soundings made her blind for a moment.

“Just sending some Christmas wishes here and there.” She murmured, leaning over Chloe and getting back to her mobile. Her social life wasn’t as glorious as in previous years, but it was nice to touch base with people she barely talked to. Rachel always liked sending holiday greetings and missed the times when postcards were way more popular. Modern technology killed the pleasure of picking the right card, writing some cute words by hand and going through the ritual of addressing and sending it off. Oh well, at least she still had the phone.

“Oh.” Chloe kissed her forehead not even trying to lurk at her screen. “Did you meet somebody new and amazing who woke up your social butterfly?”

“Since you’re flirting with Megan Fox I had to keep myself busy as well. But jokes aside I think I
actually made a new friend. Real friend.” Rachel tapped the blue bear on the sweater. She could swear it winked back at her. “Would you like me to elaborate or let you to investigate my phone?” She waved with her mobile ready to hand it if asked.

The need to tell everything about herself to somebody so close and special as Chloe was still a struggle though. Rachel liked the fact that she was indeed a mystery, with her thoughts worth a few, extensive guesses. When it came to social interactions though, the territory became slushier and slimier. She had to be an open book and got used to it already, even if acting against her own instinct.

“Hell no, you don’t have to.” Chloe, a little bit offended, scratched her arm nervously. Checking Rachel’s shit didn’t even cross her mind. “I’m not a control freak, ok? I don’t have to know everything about you and your friends. I trust you. It’s your stuff.” The blue smile wasn’t fake when it disappeared in a quick peck on the lips. Her pirate decided to give her another present, this time way more valuable and treasured. “This should be your… secret.” Chloe added and turned back running up the stairs.

Rachel sighed deeply, quite content, even if really elaborating about her new connection wouldn’t be a bad thing. Something was telling her that Chloe should’ve known about this, should get at least bits and pieces of info, but decided to enjoy the freshly returned trust and just dove into her messages, typing quickly. ‘Merry Xmas’ she started. Nah, too high schoolish, not really sophisticated, and he wouldn’t appreciate the style. Was he even celebrating Christmas though? Maybe she should go with happy holidays, be more universal? Rachel bit her lip. Should she call him by his last name or be more casual, more matey? Poor guy was probably alone in his apartment, surrounded with high art and luxury, without anybody to talk to. A simple message was the least she could do to make his day or just show that they indeed shared this special connection. And she really cared about him. Not in an intimate way of course, but still. He was a friend, a really good one. Special.

She scratched the previous message, typing ‘Merry Christmas, Mark’ hoping it would sound just right and followed Chloe to their room upstairs.
The hourglass was cold. Or wet. Maybe both. It was hard to say.

Holding his breath, he touched the thick surface again. His fingers drummed shyly. Clang. Tap. He expected an echo; a hollow, long repeatable sound that would escalate to a dull hum, but nothing like that happened. This place was engulfing everything, keeping everything inside, not willing to share, even a simple, weak clang.

Just like him.

The room was drowning in darkness, shattered by dim, muted light. Heavy, golden lamps that hung on long, thick chains moved slowly as though touched by an invisible force that could swing them with the bursting strength, but was too lazy to use its full power. The shadows were glittering and dancing on the walls, appearing and disappearing, climbing up and down the high ceiling, creating a dense illusion of life and a weird, strange presence. A thousand invisible eyes were watching them through the curtain covered windows, breathing slowly within the rhythm of the restless fabric. It was raining like cats and dogs outside, flashing away the grey piles of snow. The only thing they could hear was a quiet, soothing hum, the harmless purr of the tempest.

The master chamber of the whole house was always empty, silent and taciturn. This place had always been dark and intense, but mostly still and rigid, stiff like a held gasp jailed in a tensed chest. Even if fully lit up it was always shady and heavy with memories of one, unforgettable night, one small tragedy, one shift. It kept its secrets in dusty stuffiness. The time slows down here, has a different substance and value, too respectful to rush its guests.

Perhaps that was why Kris decided to ask them to come down here.

It was the only room that his mother left untouched, didn’t renovate and didn’t plan to change. The only one that stayed nearly empty for most of the time, always coldly abandoned, but cleaned regularly as every other corner of the Prescott house was. No one expected any explanation though, accepting the situation as it was. Always passing the closed doors with hurried steps, never looking inside and never asking questions. Nathan didn’t like this place either, but had adjusted to its darkness and soothing gloom, just like everybody else in the household did. He was good at getting used to things. Tap. Clang. Tap.

Safe from a possible interruption and insidious, not so subtle questions, they could all relax and loosen up; but scattered around like chess pieces or an ungainly game of tic-tac-toe. This place was forcing them to detach from each other and shoving them around the room. Not too close, but not separated, all pretending to be busy with their imaginary chores, not keen on speaking to one another. They hadn’t talked alone in ages, or so it felt like it. Always watched by others, admonished or sometimes scolded. The siblings became accustomed to enduring in silence and now liberated from obstacles didn’t know how to talk to each other. They forgot.

Nathan huddled over the table watching the ancient clock. He was usually silent anyway, so his lack of initiative was least noticeable. Kris leaned over the doorframe focused on her fingernails, making sure she would be the first to leave or that no one would depart before her. Not daring to close the door entirely, she left it slightly open supposedly for their safety and to observe the hallway. Bullshit. This place was making her as uneasy as the rest of them.

The flickering and crackling fireplace was Joshua’s favorite spot, as he was always striving for more warmth despite his image of an arrogant asshole. Standing still, with his arms crossed at his chest, he
looked like a bronze statue towering above them all in his superiority and power. How he could keep himself so tranquil was one of his biggest mysteries. He was great in everything he touched, including sports, swimming and football equally, one of the best photographers as well, always handsome, charming, successful with everything he intended to pursue; gifted with a golden tongue and brilliant, sharp retorts. Perfect Prescott’s son, an example for everybody else to follow but still kept in check and told what to do regardless, somebody who Nathan would never be. Joshua didn’t get summoned by the fireplace’s flames though, but by the collection of family photos, carefully placed on the mantle shelf, spread in a composition that couldn’t be rearranged or even touched.

Nathan’s brother poked one of the frames of course.

“Hah, interesting.” The most insolent and ruthless of them all, he loved to break the rules, even the unwritten ones like speaking in whisper among those walls. He chuckled and tilted his head watching the well-known faces behind the shiny glass. “I had no idea they still keep them here.”

“They wouldn’t dare to get rid of them,” Kris responded at once, grateful that she wasn’t the first to start. Talking about the photos would lead them into a serious, uneasy discussion about the family’s history though. Not a great idea. “You know them. They don’t like changes.”

“And yet, they force them on us all, don’t they, big sis?” He laughed shortly, seeing her scoffing. Then his voice got lower, a little bit dreamy like the photos possessed his attention entirely, sucked him in, tangled his thoughts and forcing his words to be strange. “We like to hide our dirty secrets beneath, bury them down in some fucking hole and pretend they don’t exist. It would be better to just burn those pictures though. We even have the fire here. Convenient.”

“They are just memories.” Said his sister, hoping he wouldn’t throw the whole collection into the fire. Not that she was so attached to those photographs, but it would be damn hard to explain it to anyone and would surely bring some consequences. Some of them might even be drastic.

Joshua’s fingers stroked the golden photo frame, scratched the tiny smudges of dirt and then carefully touched the image of a once happy family. It was hard to believe that they were actually part of this clan, presenting their childish smiles and gazes full of hope on the weathered photograph.

“So some things are better to be forgotten, big sis. There is no reason to keep all this crap here. Bullshit.” He smiled softly and turned to his sister. He wasn’t angry though, not yet. “A big pile of bullshit. A garbage mountain of lies.”

“He just wants everything to be perfect.” Nathan murmured, not lifting his head. Not talking often, he surprised them all with a rapid switch of the topic, but that’s what they meant anyway and wanted to talk about. Their father. Their monster and the loving parent. Him. He wanted a lot of things, mostly from Nathan though, and became unpredictable if his wishes didn’t come true. Kris was a lost cause at this point. Joshua had proved himself as successful and worthy. The youngest of them was the only one who didn’t even try much, and there was only the one way to do it. Perfection.

Everything had to be fucking perfect.

“No.” Kris immediately turned to him. “He wants you to be perfect.”

“What’s wrong with being perfect, Kris?” Joshua cut her off and grinned widely, looking at her for the first time since they came down here. His gaze made her anxious as though this room wasn’t enough.

She composed herself quickly.
“Nothing.” Kris responded, somehow avoiding looking at him and trying to focus on Nathan. “If you’re God, that is.”

“Maybe I am.” Joshua shrugged and took a deep breath. Nathan instinctively did the same, feeling like part of this room was infecting him inside, digging into his lungs, plunging his veins and scraping his nostrils. It was a stale, motionless air he was inhaling. A poison that he had to take to survive. It wasn’t just the old photos, not the stillness and silence that broke their voices to a whisper, or the door that had been left cracked open, but the smell. *The smell.*


Tragedy had a smell. The scent of ancient tapestry, dusty and moldy was melting with the artificial aroma of vanilla air freshener that his mother was always turning on to make this room a little bit more ordinary, a valid part of this house, a supposed gem in Arcadia Bay’s small portfolio of splendid manors. She could spray the whole collection of her luxurious perfumes, but she would never be able to kill the undertones of tears, long muted screams and one, small not so important death. The reek of something old, primal and wicked that had been there since the very beginning, before the house was built and the shore was named Arcadia Bay, was mixed with a touch of a stale odor of gunpowder, old leather, and books that no one had read. Something brave, courageous, wonderful and amazing at the same time. Dark and beautiful. Scary and amazing. Untouchable.

Like them.

“Please, just…” Usually so calm and unruffled, or so she seemed like, Kris couldn’t stand this place either. She sighed and looked at her other brother. “Nathan? Can you say something…”

He moved nervously, trying to brush off her voice like a hand from his shoulder, and touched the glossy shell of the hourglass again, caressing the curvy shape, tracing the sparkling route of the falling soil. This little ancient clock, a heritage from their great-grand-the fuck-dead-long time-father was obediently measuring unmeasurable, being regularly turned upside down and repeating, echoing and mirroring its own chores. The grains of sand were slowly dropping, patiently fulfilling their destiny, running down too slow and too fast. Switch, and they changed direction without much change. Switch and again. A rainstorm of time. Up. Down. The glass sparkled. His palms got sweaty. Clang. Tap.

Tap.

“Remember when we were kids… And our father took us hunting?” Nathan shut his eyes tightly and started slowly in a peaceful, thoughtful manner, crafting this memory with care. It had to be told just right. “This one time, during the winter. You were freezing, and the snow was deep. He killed a deer. We killed a deer.” He corrected himself and winced, still confused by what had happened that day.

“First blood.” Joshua walked to the table to pick up a few grapes. His addiction to this specific fruit was famous among the family, even if their mother hated him spitting the seeds on the floor. They weren’t living in an old barn, was her reproach but Joshua didn’t make any of it, keeping this obnoxious habit. Nathan suspected his brother didn’t like to act like that either but wanted to rebel against every single rule, even the reasonable ones. Oddly, that was why he was so loved by the family that treasured order. The Prescott paradox. “How old were we? Like seven?”

“Ten.” Kris corrected him not giving a rat’s ass about the seeds. Joshua spat on the floor again and smirked victoriously, even though his action didn’t impress anybody. Well, it was good to practice. “I remember.”
Clang. Tap. Nathan tried to focus.

“It was a great shot, right?” Smiling to himself he kept watching the sleek, arched gutter. It was beautifully made, so many details enchanted in the old maple wood. The grains looped and twirled in the light like small, white butterflies. “One bang and the deer was off. And then… He left it there to rot. We didn’t take it.”

The silence was growing.

“Yeah.” Kris nodded not sure where it was going.

“I keep thinking…” Nathan cleared his throat. “Is the deer still there? Like rotten? Does its skeleton still exist? Bare bones and its skull?” His innocent gaze met hers, and then he looked down again, embarrassed. The deer was somehow important. It was important. Clang. Tap. Tap. “Do you think that anything was left of it by now?”

Kris’s eyes grew darker. They all remembered the infamous family trip to Mount Hood when their father decided to show them how death looked like, presenting it as a famous family tradition. It was early morning, cold, dark and freezing. She didn’t want to go, neither did Nathan complaining and sobbing softly. Only Joshua was enjoying the trip, yelling and scaring all the animals in the woods with his overexcitement. Maybe it was her other brother’s plan though. Perhaps he pretended to be so eager and passionate, that no deer would stay around hearing them approaching. No one could trick Sean Prescott for long though, so Josh got slapped and since then walked in silence until the rifle was passed to the brothers and their fingers could tighten on the trigger. Clang, they checked if it was loaded. Tap, they locked the stock against their shoulders. Tap again, when they aimed. Yes, it was a sound. Tap. Tap. And fire. Nathan didn’t remember the sound of it though. All he could recall was just clang and tap.

The hunting trip was supposed to be important, to connect them more, create a common ground, change their lives. The trip did just that.

Was the big bang there? It had to be, judging by the effect of it. Nathan’s fingers were still drumming against the glass. There was so much blood painting the snow in red spatters, marking the dead trees and leafless branches. It was a living a breathing animal, ready to jump, run and escape, and then it was just a rug, a poor dead trophy at their feet.

Tap.

“Nathan....” Kris shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about the deer…”

“Maybe I do.” The surface of the hourglass almost broke under the constant rhythm of his fingers. Nathan pressed a bit more, wondering how much it would take to break it. Would it stop the time itself? Nah. A big, sticky pile of dust. Clang. That was it.

“Don’t sidetrack.” She lost her patience, finally, a fully human move. Something realistic. “You know why I’m here. Why we are here. It’s time for somebody to step forward and tell him the bitter truth. I know you need help, Nathan. I know he doesn’t let you get help, even when mom asked. I know that doctor Jacobi was begging him to allow him to treat you. I’m gonna make sure it will change, alright?” Information about Nathan’s mental state was entirely confidential, but Kris had her ways and knew how to ask questions. Since no one cared about privacy in this household, she didn’t bother with this idea either, walking to her father’s office and checking all the notes he had about the youngest of his sons. He had plenty. Reports, medical opinions, warnings, letters, meds, and prescriptions he never picked up. Drawer after drawer, folders, envelopes, and files stacked up, put together in long, untouchable piles just like the family photos on the fireplace. Their father liked to
collect things, but it didn’t mean he wanted to do anything about the case. For Kris, it was clear that Sean Prescott investigated the subject thoughtfully, and decided that this investment wasn’t worth advancing.

Nathan wasn’t worth it.

“The fuck did you smoke in this jungle, Kris?” Joshua sneered and snorted shortly. A few sharp noises sounded like a rusted engine trying to start. He found more grapes and started to chew on them. “Did you forget how things are dealt with here?”

The steps of heavy boots thumped in the hallway. Somebody was rushing, perhaps looking for them, running through the staircase now, opening and slamming back the doors. One of the servants, maybe their driver, thankfully not a member of the family. Kris peered outside, hesitated and then closed the door completely, locking them down in the room without a single crack of light from the outside. The room became smaller, stiller and more intense, forcing them to come closer, meet in its center, but they fought this order still keeping their distance. The thick curtains swallowed the rest of the light. It should get warmer, she thought, but they were all freezing, just like that one night on Mount Hood. And one night years before it, in the same exact place, seeing their family falling apart.

Nathan felt imprisoned by this space even more. He had never been in jail, always avoiding arrests even if caught by the school officials, but that was exactly how he imagined it. A cold, stiff place where no one spoke loudly. Kind of different from what they showed on TV.

“I didn’t forget, trust me.” Their sister said, feeling as odd as them now, and trying to find the most comfortable position to stand, maybe sit. Nothing worked. She started walking around in circles, as her thoughts were already running back and forth. The whole plan she had in her head and tried to carefully execute went to shit anyway. “Listen, I know you’ve been going through a lot of crap and face most of those things alone, but you’re not alone, baby brother. Not anymore.”

“And what are you gonna do? Turn the world upside down?”

“It will figure something out.” She snapped, annoyed by her older brother.

It had always been like that, being stuck in the middle between two strong individuals. Kris and Josh always arguing, and he was listening, even if it was about him. The more in the middle he was, the lonelier he got. Even the secret didn’t help, as he suspected that his brother invented it only to justify his actions and mark himself a winner of every fight regardless. Kris, always great with disputes and even better with promises, tried to keep her word but always failed somehow getting into another brawl and being occupied by something else. Up and down. It didn’t matter who was starting the argument, it didn’t matter how it ended, it was always a turn, a switch, and the sand began to fall to the other side. Nathan was falling too, he was one big failure, one big nothing. Worthless. They tried to help him but made him feel even worse. Great job, really.

Tap.

Joshua looked at Kris, then at Nathan and chuckled, adjusting his red vintage football jacket. He was so proud of this one, precisely the same their father wore in high school. A golden trophy for the Prescott boys, a holy grail of acceptance that his younger brother had never experienced. He wasn’t even allowed to touch this precious piece of clothing, but Joshua was immune to such prohibitions. One day the jacket just appeared on his back, and he almost never took it off. Dickhead, always getting whatever he wanted and right now all he was striving for was to show Kris her place in his typical, harsh and brutally honest way.

“Promising, big sis. Really. You think we didn’t try? You think we didn’t do everything we could?”
Losing his fortitude, he choked on words, swallowing the sentences quickly. A brutal truth had to be served cold though, otherwise changed into an emotional mumble. Fuck cold. “You’ve come back after a few letters here and there, and you try to tell us how the universe works? Get back to your bush, Kris, if that’s all you have.”

He was always playing on her nerves, pushing and almost driving up the wall but always retracting or shutting up before she was about to explode. Clever and more efficient than just a simple argument or insult. Kris ignored him altogether though, walking towards Nathan.

“You can’t deal with it alone!” Her reflection danced on the hourglass. “It’s insane! He thinks it’s just some stupid excuse for some generic teenage depression, but we know better.” Even calling Sean Prescott a father didn’t come easily. They all did it of course, but it always sounded like a mockery, a satire of a family, an inside joke. Kris preferred a simple, ordinary he instead. Just like their father was somebody average, not important, easy to conquer. “We all know better, and you too! You are in danger, Nathan. It’s progressing, it’s twisting your mind, changing what you see or hear or… Damn, little brother. I was told that you get in trouble…” Fuck, she said too much. Her brothers knew that most of their secrets weren’t safe when she was around, especially when desperate to dig deeper. Apparently, her persistence paid off with some good reliable info. Kris had been asking questions, again.

Not good.

“Told by who?” Nathan asked, getting a bit more cautious.

“Nevermind.” She held back immediately. “People always talk about us, Nathan. We’re Prescotts. I asked around about how things are, and they don’t look super bright and sunny right now. You will be fine. You can be fine. I know you lost all your hopes, but we can beat this thing. We can... tone it down.” She tried to hug him, but he wriggled out. “I came back for you.”

“Only?”

Kris bit her lip.

“Mostly.” She stated carefully. “We are family. You’re family. You didn’t forget about me when I was in Brazil, risking a shitload to send me an email from time to time and I will never forget it or let you go. Never. Ever.” The more she spoke, the easier it became, like a waterfall of trepidations and apprehensions that couldn’t be stopped. She had to cut herself off to take a breath. “Listen, I don’t know what’s in your head and what bothers you, but I’m worried. Concerned. If there is anything, I can do to help you…”

“Anything?” Nathan asked again, striving for more. For years he was questioning her dedication, hoping that maybe, just maybe Joshua was wrong about her. Her and many more. His brother gave him a quick look, warning him silently.

Be careful, Nathan. It’s just a game, Nathan. Just a pile of garbage. Lies.

Clang. Tap.

“Yeah.” Kris nodded and tried to smile, but it came up as weak, grimace, a derisive grin armed the perfectly white teeth. “Whatever you’re facing now, whatever you’re struggling with, I’m here. You can talk to me about anything or just sit in silence if you want to. I knew you better than myself. Now… I know things changed, that you’re under… certain influences…” She looked around, trying not to look at Josh, but it was obvious what she had in mind.
Be careful, Nathan. Remember who your ally is, Nathan.

Fuck Josh. Fuck his stories. Fuck everything he told him about the people Nathan felt for. He should tell her though. She was listening to him, paying attention to every breath, every sound, alerted and willing to understand. Nathan never had the guts to tell her the truth, the real thing, but maybe it was the time, just perhaps. He had almost done it years ago, but then she betrayed him, just like Joshua predicted and got sent away. But maybe now. She was so real, so here, so...

“Influences? Bitch.” Joshua had to sense something. He pushed her hard, forcing her to take a few steps back and spat on the floor, this time only with bubbling, white saliva, no grape seeds. “You lost your chance and screwed up our special connection years ago when you hooked up with this kid. You cared about your little brother so much that you couldn’t keep it in your pants!”

“It’s my life.” She stood up to him, not willing to elaborate. It was about Nathan today, not her. It was about her younger brother who lost his way, this little kid she wanted to save.

Joshua laughed again, this time in a very cold and severe way. No fun, just building anger, something primeval and dangerous, fueled by the heatless fire and the stiff, rigid room they all had been locked in.

“And this is mine!” Flickering flames reflected in his eyes, as freezing as the air around them. Every ounce of effort to keep this talk calm and civil melted down, scuttled into the deep, red carpet that was howling down their steps, gestures, even smiles. “This is our reality, Kris. Our world. Dysfunctional, crazy, unreal, but ours. What have you been thinking? That you can take a few years of vacation from the famous Prescott nest and everybody would praise you for your advice? You didn’t win any war. You didn’t accomplish anything. There was no victory, big sis. He let you come back here. He allowed it. You begged him long enough, and he finally agreed. You can’t turn the tables. He is turning yours.”

It was a miracle she stayed calm, surprising even herself.

“He doesn’t control my life,” Kris stated bluntly, not even sure how truthful her words were. Sure, she was an adult, with a career and her own money, free from obligations of proving herself. Failing so many times, she didn’t intend to impress Sean Prescott and had not much to lose. However, the fear was still there.

Meeting in this room was a mistake, she thought.

“You bet, he does. You lost your mind, Kris. You’re fucking delusional.” Joshua rolled his eyes and leaned over the wall. The shadows started to dance on the red jacket, marked it with stripes of black and gold. The valuable piece of clothing got stained when he wiped his sticky fingers in it. A secret artifact or not, he was too lazy to grab a napkin. “And useless. You can’t help anybody, even yourself.”

Raising her hands in a peaceful gesture, she stood still for a good minute trying to find the right way to break this statement. She was one step away of giving up and jumping into this mud fight with her older brother, proving to him who was right, what was true but knew from the experience they would end up empty-handed, with no winner and their energy wasted. Nathan was the priority now though. She had to talk to him, disregarding the other one.

“Look, I know you’ve been under constant pressure...”

“Pressure?” Nathan said shyly and stroked the curve of the old hourglass one more time. “There is no pressure.” Not much more than usual, he wanted to say, but this term had a different meaning.
among the Prescotts. It was the horrendous pressure that forced them to do horrible things, the calm one that made them explain themselves over and over, and the infinite one that defined them as a family.

There would be no Prescotts without pressure.

Josh laughed at his statement, almost bent in half, giggling like a little, annoying brat. He couldn’t stop cracking up; chuckling and snorting and then it got cut as soon as it had started. Nathan had it right though. No pressure, funny. He could be so funny. Kris narrowed her eyes. Her impatience finally took over the compassion and worry.

“No pressure like promising to introduce your girlfriend to the family?” Hissing, she started walking back and forth, still guarding the door. “The same girlfriend who is now married, changed her last name and is strangely not interested in anyone with a dick? You think our father won’t learn about your little trick? It’s a matter of weeks now, if not days, and you know he will start hell!”

The room sucked the exclamation point in her yell, eating it raw.

Joshua shrugged also strolling in circles and watching their sister intensely. No one could stay in one place. They just had to move just like a bunch of wild dogs in a cage. Only Nathan remained still, but he was afraid of the sounds of his own steps, not sure how his feet worked. A good kid, though. A good kid born in the wrong family. Still playing with this hourglass, cleaning it, tapping, caressing and stroking he looked like a shy child, missing his favorite toy. It was his way of an internal stroll. His way of dealing with things. Distraction.

Tap. Clang.

His nails scratched the glass with a sharp, piercing sound. Time was a funny thing, just like reality. Nathan used to wonder if people were still talking when he wasn’t around or stood in half-move, with empty eyes and words unspoken, just like those little clockwork toys that wouldn’t move if he didn’t turn them on. He had a few- a plastic soldier, a wooden turtle, a fully grinning monkey playing cymbals. Clang. Clang. Would a tree make a sound if it fell in a forest without anybody around? If he wasn’t there would they still argue, saying all those things to each other, pressing him and one another, dancing in circles, yell and whisper?

Would they?

Kris didn’t pay attention to Josh at all, disregarding his existence and focusing on her younger brother only. Nathan didn’t have to ask to know those two didn’t like each other very much, especially after what happened a few years ago. She never spoke a word to Joshua willingly and answered him only in anger. He usually returned the favor, shouting at her when it was critical and necessary, usually leaving her alone and letting her be, but still damn satisfied with the misery he put her through. Yeah, it was bitchy to tell their father about Gingrich, but no one could’ve stopped Joshua when he set his mind on something. He wanted to punish this little whore, get payback for looking down on him, bragging about how good, clever and smart she was. Not enough attention, he said when they walked together to their father’s office. She lost her way, missing the point, not noticing the danger. They lost control over her. She had to learn her lesson, and so she did.

It was time to teach her another one.

“Why would he care who Rachel Amber fucks?” Josh snorted, reminding her that he was indeed present. Why she asked him to join this family get-together was beyond him, but he wouldn’t miss the opportunity to make her day worse. Damn bitch. A sister, blood of their blood, but still a bitch. If they weren’t related, he would get rid of her once and for all. He knew how though, it wouldn’t be
Family. Fucking picture perfect. Fucking trouble, nothing more.

“Why would you lie to him?” Nathan wasn’t sure who this question was addressed to since his sister looked at him and at him only. “And she’s not Amber anymore. Rachel is serious about her marriage to the point that she ditched her famous last name. He can check it any moment looking into the school records, and trust me, he wouldn’t be pleased. The old man counts on this relationship between you two, hoping to be all buddy-buddy with James Amber.” She might not be fully up to date with the recent events, but it didn’t take her long to learn what was going on and why their father wanted Rachel to hook up with his son. Being hot and educated was always a nice bonus, but Sean Prescott didn’t care about those things much. Business, prestige, money and the net of connection were more important. If James Amber’s daughter looked like an old hag, he would still be playing matchmaker forcing Nathan to date her anyway. Her younger brother was in love with the girl though, and he couldn’t have chosen worse.

Fucking daddy, always messing with his children’s love interests. Only Josh was free from this trouble, but he fucked whoever he wanted not staying in any long-term relationship, following his desires, not feelings. If he had any.

“I’m just… not proving him wrong.” Nathan’s fingers pulsated against the hourglass. If he could only reverse time. If she didn’t have to leave. If Joshua didn’t do all those things to her. If his father… If. Clang. Clang.

“Yeah, not proving him wrong usually has these amazing effects like a long time in Brazil, right?” Her voice sounded weirdly low, resonating between the ceiling, the shadows on the walls and the river of falling sand. “Or any other cozy place. No drugs or career in photography would fucking solve it.”

Nathan’s eyes flashed in panic for a second.

Did she know about Mark too? Probably, but not everything though, Jefferson would never tell her about their projects. Even the idea that she might try to talk to his teacher made Nathan tremble. He got cold. And drugs… Drugs were necessary, he wanted to say but didn’t find enough courage to speak up. They helped him to focus and forget about the secret, about the real truth, that Josh was talking about all the time. He had to lash out, lose control from time to time, forgetting about himself a bit, becoming somebody else. Like Josh. The drugs were helping, really helping, a fix or two, nothing big, his sister should understand it, but Nathan didn’t say a thing.

“Oh, the holy, saint Kristen. Because you don’t like any vice, huh?” said Joshua still watching the cold fireplace, fueled by big, fat logs that was nothing more than an illusion of heat. It made Nathan smile a bit. The big brother got him, at least somebody. “It’s not so easy to live in this shithole when every step of yours is being watched. Everybody needs a break, and if you came back for good, you will learn it pretty fucking fast. If you ever forgot.”

Kris shrugged, already tired of this talk. Her memory was still damn vivid, and forgetting wasn’t an easy thing for the Prescotts, even if desirable. It wasn’t only about sending her to Brazil though, but the neglect and rejection, a silent treatment from everybody in the family when she felt so alone in this new, strange country. Only Nathan was brave enough. The boy who was afraid of his own shadow was the only one to reach out to her. Just him.

Fucking irony.

“I can’t tell him the truth,” Nathan whispered, hoping that Joshua couldn’t hear him. It felt so wrong
to tell those secrets aloud. Kris had to understand though. “I’m not ready. I’m not worthy.”

“Delusional self-loathing won’t get you anywhere.” She walked to him. Supposedly a friendly, nice gesture, but her steps drummed coldly on the marble floor. Every footstep forced him to curl up inside, distracting him, dividing him more. Then she reached the carpet that muted her moves, making them less scary. He sunk into the hug before noticing that she opened her arms for him, and let her bring him closer, listening to her heartbeat. The sound was a surprise, a slap in his face. Clang. Clang. Tap. “Look, Rachel is not really a problem here. Your well-being is way more…”

“Rachel just needs time.” Seeing their siblings so close annoyed Josh. Unexpectedly, he got scared as well, afraid of being left outside, not being part of this weird commitment. He wanted to be part of everything though, even his little brother’s affair with this Amber slut; but Nathan would get her. She would be his, full stop. “It’s a matter of time. Look at her little blue trash she’s yanking everywhere. It won’t last long, even James Amber thinks so. Her little lesbo adventure will come to an end.”

“Because that’s how it works, huh? You know it’s not true.” Discussing dykes with their sister usually didn’t come easily. She had an entirely different, crooked idea about it and was very protective of her statement. Josh sighed. Desperate to avoid sidetracking, Kris switched back to the topic. “You can yell at me, dig into my personal stuff, call me an idiot and tell me to go fuck myself. It won’t stop me. I won’t just freaking disappear. You know why?” She hugged Nathan tightly. “Because I fucking care about you and I won’t stop caring. Between the parties and booze, the perfect image of the rich kid, the photos, the desperate tries to impress him, I can see you slipping, Nathan. I… I worry. Just… We can deal with this. You and me.”

“What if we can’t?” Nathan felt his cheeks becoming wet, or cold, or both. It was hard to say. Kris felt so material right now. Pulse. Heartbeat. Warmth. A definition of existence.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“I’m your sister, Nathan. I will always find the right way. Always. We will.” She tried to hug him again, but he snapped out of her touch, like a dog after a long, cold shower ashamed of his weakness. Josh noticed his glossy cheeks as well and chuckled. Crybaby, fucking kid. “Together. I’m not telling you that I will be able to fix everything but… I just have your back, alright? I know it’s not an easy thing to ask, but please, trust me, and I will help you to… to… cope?”

Nathan nodded obediently. Coping didn’t sound scary, it was… manageable somehow. They could spend some time together, right? Just talk, walk around, maybe grab a bite or just visit a few places. Not the junkyard though, not there. Not the cold darkroom below Blackwell’s walls, but there were some amazing places around. Arcadia Bay had a sweet, brightened face as well. They could do it together.

“Cope or rope.” Josh broke in. He would never admit it, but he was scared, deadly scared that one day Nathan would do something irreversible. That one day he would stop paying attention and he would just silently pick a string, a golden shot or a full metal jacket bullet and change their lives forever, just like the deer did. Every time their brother got a bit too silent, a tad too shy, Josh got nervous, and his little brother was obnoxiously calm right now. Like all his inner screams got inside of this stupid hourglass he was playing from the very beginning, pouring from one place to another, but muted, unbearable, divided between up and down.

“Don’t you even dare to think about anything stupid.” Kris got scared a bit too. “And if you do, please just fucking call me alright? Or text me. I will be there for you. Just…” How to talk to her brother about suicide not being too overprotective, nosey or cliché? How to tell him that everything would be just all right, just fine? It was always humiliating for both parties. Unfair. Hard. Her sweat became icy.
“I won’t!” Nathan said nervously, suffering under their watchful gazes. Pressure. More pressure, this time from them. This room was making them do those things to him, questioning him, giving him hope and… Tap. Clang. Death. Killing himself. Sure, he thought about it from time to time, but Josh wouldn’t let him be serious about it. He would get angry, punish him or worse. Even one, infinite black hole of calm wasn’t worth it. And now Kris, they both teamed up against him. They found common ground. They… “I won’t… Do… Anything… Stupid…” He finished and closed his eyes, panting heavily.

Alone, he felt alone again. There was no one to side with him for longer than a brief moment. Everybody just insisted, and pressed and told him what to do. Clang. Clang. Crack?

“Alright, since no one will blow their heads tonight, are we done with this pep talk?” Josh shrugged, trying not to show how worried he was. An asshole, a dickhead, a king of life, but his twin brother was the most important person. No one wanted to see him dead, miserable or out of control. Kris wouldn’t be able to help, that was damn obvious, but he had to do something before his time here would end. Prevent. But not today, not now. Nathan’s struggle was hitting too close to home. Too close to his own dark thoughts, his own tragedy and he didn’t want to think about it any longer. “I’m kinda in a rush.” He barked ready to leave this damn, fucking room. The place where everything started and everything would end. One day.

Not today though.

“Rush?” Kris frowned. “Ah, the party tonight. Yeah, I should get ready as well.”

“Were you invited?” Josh stopped in the mid-step. His sister attending the New Year’s event would be the definition of misery, not fun. Knowing their luck, she would watch them the whole time. “How?”

“By Rachel?” Nathan could think about the one reason only.

“No.” Kris rolled her eyes. If her brothers suspected her to hit on the married girl, they were dead wrong. If they were afraid of her asking Amber’s daughter a few questions, she didn’t plan anything like that either. “Forget about Rachel. The sooner you will, the better for you. And no, I have absolutely no interest in even chatting with her, don’t you worry. I just wanted to visit the old walls, I still have some friends here and there. Like…”

“Like Gingrich, huh?” Josh almost reached the door but turned back and pointed at her. “And you’re telling me you can provide help? That you will find the way out for the fucking problems? Look at yourself, Kris!” He wanted to push her so hard that she would fall to her knees, drowning in the warm, fucking rotten carpet. “You’re doing it again! Again! Don’t unpack your bags, big sis. You will see Brazil again faster than you think!”

“There is nothing…” She tried to deny the accusations, but the sound of the door being opened loudly forced her to shut up. Nathan, taking this opportunity, snuck out as well and ran after his brother, hoping to escape this space, along with more questions mixed with promises. Alone, alone, alone. He was always alone anyway, so fuck it.

“Sure, it is.” Josh turned back once again. “And just in case we won’t see each other before midnight, Happy New Year, Kris. May all your dreams come true.” And he left leaving her in the empty, silent and dark room alone.

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“Kris is just trying. I know she is.” Nathan murmured still trying to protect her. Always torn between who he should support, he got even quieter, speaking annoyingly slow, not sure how to get his point across. Sure, Kris was trying, but not trying enough or in the wrong department. Still an effort.

Josh scoffed.

They were sitting in Nathan’s red Volvo in the Blackwell parking lot, not willing to leave the car and walk to the main building. Josh let him drive today, which was quite unusual, as his bother always got annoyed by the lack of speed and not enough risky decisions on the road but was still drowning in his thoughts after the talk with Kris. Even now he was contemplating what their sister said, lighting up a cig and slowly filling the small space with an itchy smoke. The rain was slackening a little, already done with washing out of the remains of a short Oregon winter, leaving the roads filthy and the trees grayer. The weather report said this night should be nice and dry though, perfect for fireworks and partying outside.

“She’s more unstable than you will ever be,” leaning back in his seat and stretching, Josh played with his creased pack of Pall Malls and the golden lighter. “Those letters were a mistake. A few emails and she thinks she is entitled to get into your business. Our business.” He released the smoke through his nostrils and threw back his head thinking intensely. Then his eyes sparkled, almost exploded in glimmers. “Jesus fucking Christ, you almost told her. You almost fucking spilled the beans. You’re pathetic, Nat.” He smacked his arm. “You’re just stupid, whining, retarded idiot.”

The big secret, yes. Nathan felt guilty. He wanted to share it with somebody, even if it sounded crazy or would be judged. Kris wouldn’t take advantage of it though, perhaps understand more instead, but then again it would put Josh in danger. He had to protect his brother too.

Damn, it was so hard. Confusing.

“Sometimes I think…” He tapped his steering wheel. “It would be nice to tell her, you know. It’s not easy to just… And we can trust her. I know we can.” He stated not being entirely convinced that it was really true. Kris could react weirdly and cross many lines when provoked or desperate. Putting up a face of the awesome older sister she loved to imagine that she could solve every problem and would probably feel challenged by the damn secret. She felt real, as real as him though, and even if she failed to recognize a lot of things, Kris somehow believed in this one big failure, called Nathan Prescott. She gave him the benefit of the doubt he couldn’t afford.

“No, we can’t.” Josh was always fucking realistic. No sentiments. “Remember what happened last time? She betrayed you, Nathan. She left you alone, first for pussy licking and then because our lovely dad had to pay people to send her away. She wasn’t there when you needed her. I was!”

“She had to leave because of you!” Nathan yelled back and drown in more guilt, sinking in his driver’s seat afraid of what Josh would say or scream next. His brother could be unpredictable, switching from the best buddy to a cruel monster with a simple snap of the fingers. This time he remained calm though, already exhausted after the afternoon talk.

Josh only shrugged, not even partly taking the blame. Their sister paid a high price for seducing a minor and calling it love, but in his opinion, she was damn lucky not to end up in jail with a sexual predator sticker in her files for the rest of her life. All her explanations weren’t even worth their father’s time not to mention his. Just dust and shit, a humongous pile of garbage and lies, he thought. The worst thing was, she still thought she was right and that there was absolutely nothing wrong with her actions.
For Josh, the world was a very simple construct. Kris should be grateful she got away with fucking a kid. Father should have never let her come back, but he did, and it was his burden now. Nat shouldn’t feel guilty. End of story. Done.

“No, Kris got what she deserved. I did what had to be done. And don’t even think about telling her about this thing! Mark is the only person who knows about us and let’s keep it this way.” One mention about the teacher and Nathan curled up again. Fuck, this guy was really scared by everything around, including their mentor who could be harsh, but at least he acknowledged the basics. Mark was cool though. Wild. “We should talk to him, let him know what this little bitch is up to.” Telling Jefferson about Kris and her private investigation made Nathan tremble, but he managed to hide it, unbuckling his seatbelt. Keeping his hands busy was the only way to deceive his brother. “So, what’s the plan for tonight? Just hanging out?” He heard Josh asking like the tense topic wasn’t touched a second ago.

Nathan looked outside at the colorful crowd that gathered in front of the dorm, cheering, drinking and already in a festive mood. Everybody was having fun. Everybody must have fun like an invisible gun was put to their heads. Now, enjoy! New Year’s celebrations were always an obligation, another social duty, usually not really a good day. Nathan had to be there though, taking part in stupid conversations, watching Josh being this amazing social butterfly, or hide in the corner. Stupid rule. Stupid time. Stupid night.

Tap.

No one ever asked him what he wanted. No one. Everybody was just pressing him, ordering him around knowing what was best, what was right. Now he should go and celebrate and celebrate big of course! Tomorrow he should die in his bed, defeated by a hangover. Six days after he should attend the Three Kings parade because they always did, the family was always there, so he had to, and so on.

He had to.

“Kind of.” He said despite his reservation. Wanting to elaborate he turned to Josh, but then noticed two people arguing outside, just by the side of his car. “Oh, fuck.”

Josh’s eyebrow rose, and then he opened the side window a bit, to listen to what those two were fighting about. Neither of the brothers were even remotely interested in those girls screaming at each other, but it would be nice to get some info, the juicier the better. Caulfield and Price didn’t argue very often, so it had to be serious and probably about Rachel as well. The blue trash wouldn’t shut up about her conquer, a master manipulation that forced Nathan’s girlfriend to get into this weird, abnormal relationship. Caulfield, on the other hand, even being her best friend, wasn’t a big fan of their marriage either. Nathan suspected she wanted Chloe for herself and Gingrich was just a consolation prize to keep her busy in the meantime.

“What do you want me to do, Max?” They heard Price yelling and then hitting the side of her beaten-up truck with full force. The old rusty, as she called her pickup, squeaked a little, carrying a heavy, rather explosive load of fireworks of every kind. It seemed that the blue punk wanted to either celebrate big this year or blow up the whole school once and for all. Nathan hoped for the latter. “Slap her?” Kick her ass? Max, please talk to me.”

“No, stay still.” Joshua pressed him back onto the seat, trying to remain as still as possible. They didn’t notice the brothers yet, maybe because of the car’s shaded windows or they were too busy with their scuffle. Either way, Josh wanted to keep it that way. “I want to listen to this.” He whispered, getting more curious.
“I don’t want you to do anything…” Max finally responded, noticing that Chloe wouldn’t let her go without an answer. Her grey hoodie was almost completely wet as she ran out of Blackwell forgetting about her rain jacket. “You just act so… normal, like it was ok!”

Price hit her car again, still panting after the run. Coughing a bit, she shook her head, gasping and trying to find the strength to express herself in speaking. Too many smokes lately, she thought. Running marathons around Blackwell wasn’t something Chloe was up to these days. Max, fleeting in the middle of an introduction to Nathan’s sister was probably one of the most surprising things that she had ever done. Just a few friendly gestures, one name, one handshake and off she bolted, just like a scary hippie ghost on crack. Leaving her alone wasn’t an option, so Chloe just murmured a simple apology and chased after her, hoping that Rachel would find a believable excuse for the whole thing and wouldn’t give her much shit later.

“Kris is just a guest here!” When his sister’s name got mentioned, Nathan clenched his teeth so hard, it almost crushed a few. His chest got heavy. Josh giggled lightly, excited to hear more. “She’s Nathan sister for crying out loud! And a Blackwell alumni!” The side of the old car got hit again, but this time by accident, not on purpose. Price tried to give her a friendly hug, but Caulfield avoided the gesture like she didn’t want to be touched at all. “Listen, I can’t just throw her out the door. Like fucking goodbye, no exes allowed?”

“But you just said hi and shook her hand and… And…” Max looked at her shoes, also wet. The rain grew louder, drumming noisily on the truck bed’s plastic cover and the metal skeletons and shiny bodies of the cars around them. Space was filled with the vehicles though, but with no human being around. Everybody had already found cover between the school’s walls or were hanging out in small groups far from the parking lot.

“I’m trying to act civil! Dude, it’s not against you! You know I have your back! Always!” Somehow between one yell and another, Chloe calmed down, thinking. “Alright. Do you want her to walk the plank, huh?” Wiping her face from the rain, the blue pirate sighed deeply. She really didn’t want to make a scene or visibly ignore Kris but couldn’t stand her friend being so upset. Max had heard a lot about Steph’s ex-girlfriend, especially lately since the famous Prescott’s daughter had come back, but there was a huge difference between being told and experiencing her presence in person. Kris was intense and hot. One of those girls who didn’t take prisoners when they wanted something. Unfortunately, Max Caulfield was possibly standing in her way, or at least tried to. Somebody had to do something then and Chloe, in the name of her loyalty, was nominated to be today’s hero. Ah, damn it. “Chill. I ain’t gonna beat her up. Alright, translation from pirate to human. Do you want me to ask Kris to leave?”

“No. Yes.” Her little freckle was fighting with her own decision making. Stifling her own desires and following the proper code of conduct didn’t work anymore. On the other hand, Kris was still just a guest. Just a stranger. Just… “No! One week! One fucking week and she’s everywhere! I see her in the town, in the school, waiting at the parking lot, even at this party! Have you seen how she looks at Steph?”

The brothers listened to the conversation without moving, with their hearts racing at the same pace and holding their breaths. The smoke was still whirling in the car, making them anxious and apprehensive, like it could blow their cover. Even if they were discovered though, they learned more than expected already. So here it was. Their sister was still interested in stepping twice in the same, terrible river. All her words about being here for Nathan were nothing more than smoke and mirrors since her obsession with Gingrich hadn’t fucking died. On top of everything she was trying to get this shitty crew’s attention and was chatting with Rachel. Nathan gasped. His sister was talking to Rachel, maybe even right now, in this very moment.
“I told you.” Josh broke the silence and then pressed a finger to his lips preventing Nathan to say anything back. They would talk later though. Oh, they would.

“Yeah, she’s kinda into her, but you know it can be just a sentimental thing or some old feelings.” Chloe shrugged, trying to look at the bright side. “Well, not feelings, more like memories? She doesn’t have many friends here, so just sticks around. It’s kinda normal, I guess?” Ah, damn, it wasn’t helping. They all knew what Kris was up to. It was visible in every move, every look she gave Steph, every polite or clever response. Old love didn’t die so easily, Chloe was an expert in that field and could give a series of lectures about every stage of trying to kill off some unwanted feelings. Fuck. “Max, you have let it go. It’s not like Steph is all over her or anything. Instead of hissing at me, you should talk to your girlfriend!”

“Ex-girlfriend.” Her friend murmured and took a step away, trying to hide in the shadow of the big, rusty truck.

Her vehement reaction stupefied Nathan. Caulfield was always so invisible, he never actually considered her to have any kind of feelings or concerns. Her shy shadow was just there, placed between other Blackwell decorations, like a table, a lamp, or a locker. Never demanding any of his attention or favors, Max could not exist at all, not even as one of the illusions of the world around him. Since Kate Marsh decided to drop out, he would barely see her anyway and was now surprised to learn she was, indeed, as disturbed by Kris coming back as him and Josh.

Were her problems even real though? Was she real?

“Jesus Christ, decide! If she’s already your ex what is this shit about? Did you break up or not? Women!” Never even close to winning a competition in patience, Chloe rose her hand and growled in desperation. Then seeing her friend’s shoulders shake in a weak sob, she broke through the invisible wall of refusal and hugged the little freckle, covering her from the rain a bit. No, no discussion. The hug would be delivered either way. “Hey, Super Max, don’t you cry. Alright, cry the fuck out of it, I’m here ok? Maybe I really should beat the shit out of them? Rachel could help, you know. She’s pretty handy with like wood boards and shit.”

“You’re funny.” Came a soft whisper. Max finally relaxed a bit, still enjoying the embrace, a moment without a critical choice. The fact that her friend was here for her and was willing to help her no matter what was the best message this rainy day brought her; it warmed Max up more than the strong, blue arms around her, and reminded her how to smile.

“I’ve been told.” Chloe was still holding her, letting the rain to drench them to the bone. It was getting cold, but they could warm each other up a little, not willing to get back or hide in the truck. “Do you want me to take you home? Like to the dorms? We can elope, sneak out, fuck this party. I can just call Rachel and…”

“But the fireworks…”

Chloe scoffed, peering at the pile under the plastic canvas, patiently waiting for the midnight strike. Two weeks ago, she found tons of those fun explosives at the back of her garage, helping David clean the space a little and making more room for tons of parts he got on Black Friday. The collection probably belonged to William, and since Joyce wasn’t a big fan of fireworks at all, always advising them about how dangerous those toys were, Chloe's dad had to hide them deeply between his belongings. He had to buy them on sale, after 4th of July over five years ago and the blue rebel suspected that most of this shit already expired but testing them without an occasion seemed like blasphemy. Plus, it was like a sign that Chloe discovered them only days before the New Year.
Apparently, William wanted her to say goodbye to this extremely intense year with a big boom. Rachel didn’t try to change her girl’s mind much, mentioning only that she would really appreciate Chloe still having two hands in 2014 and even helped to load them all on the bed of the truck.

“Oh, fuck those! Who needs to blow up shit if your world is falling apart, huh?” She sniffled and then, understanding how harsh her statement was, she retracted immediately, tightening the hug. “Uh, sorry… I didn’t mean that. We can just ditch this whole stupid party. If you want.”

“No, Chloe. I will be fine.” Free from tears and getting her cheeks wet only with the raindrops, Max let herself smile again, weakly as usual and tapped her friend’s shoulder. “I will be fine but just… Can you just be nearby? Like if I needed…” It felt good to have Chloe back. It felt good to be protected, even from something that she would have to deal with herself without the blue rebel present. Ruining all the chances that Steph had given her, Max knew it would be damn hard to start something anew, although Chloe’s company gave a glimpse of hope. Unrealistic, sure, a little bit cheap and decorated by a lot of pirate slang, but still hope.

“Bluebeard’s support is always here, mate. Always. And I’m more than ready to kick some ass if you need me to.” Chloe winked and took her hand, ready to get back to the school. Damn, they hadn’t held hands since they were kids, but it felt so good now. Kris could go fuck herself as far as the blue rebel was concerned. No one could stress out her friend, full stop. Max had enough on her head already. “Or fire freaking M80s up their butt.” She was only partly joking.

“Aren’t they illegal?” The little freckle frowned looking at the truck one more time. “What’s up with you and blowing up somebody’s entrails?” Pulled, she followed her friend without question, ready to face the uncomfortable if needed and found undiscovered scraps of strength. A power of support, or some sort of blue magic.

“Practice,” Chloe said when they were leaving the parking lot. “Years of practice. And I love to blow shit up.”

They talked for a moment longer, as their voices slowly disappeared in the hum of rain. Nothing important though, some jokes, some confessions, plans for today, tomorrow, next year. A few resolutions for a very uncertain future. He heard Rachel’s name a few times, but Steph wasn’t mentioned even once. Finally, they disappeared in the dark mouth of the school’s gate, leaving only the rain to fill the silence.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Joshua remained quiet for a long minute, finishing his smoke and then killing it on the dashboard. The embers sizzled against the light brown leather, scarring it forever. One more rule broken, Nathan thought, hoping that his father would never get in and see this burnt hole. His fingers still grasped the steering wheel frantically, like his body forgot that Price and Caulfield ended their little chat, were a long time gone and there was nothing to stress about.

Except what Josh would say.

“So, since those two stupid cunts couldn’t keep their convo private, there’s your answer, little bro.” Sighing deeply, Josh didn’t even look astounded. As predicted, Kris wanted her little dyke back. Liar. Cheater. No moral spine. “You asked, and it got delivered on a silver fucking plate. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers loudly, trying to wake Nathan up.

It didn’t work though. His little brother drifted in a daydream, still mentally locked in the room, that
room one more time, when everything had started, where his life changed and surviving another day
seemed like jumping into an active volcano than walking in the park. He was a Prescott, it should be
easy for him. It should. It wasn’t.

Josh moaned, knowing his little brother usually shut down while stressed. A small, freaking crab in
his golden shell that became immune to every type of knocking, including a good, firm slap. Nathan
liked to turn down all his system and sit there inside himself, holding onto his own darkness and the
only way to deal with it, was patience. So, Josh waited, hoping this dream wouldn’t last long.

Dream. Nathan felt like drowning in nightmares the whole time though. That was the big secret.
Everything was just one big fucking dream. A fucking pile of garbage and illusion. One day in that
particular room, between those magical, shady walls, in the light of old lamps and the eyes of black
windows he got illuminated, or so Josh called it. His father brought them here, both of his sons, and
started to explain how reality worked. That they imagine things too much, that they lived in a fucking
fantasy and it had to stop, he said. Stop now! It was time to get real, even if they were six, too much
time got wasted. It was the first and only time when Nathan questioned him, standing his ground and
his dad, his beloved, admired father got angry and slapped him. Really fucking hit him so hard that
the six-year-old kid fell on the floor and couldn’t get up. Bang. It didn’t hurt though. Nathan heard
the slap, heard his mother screaming, his sister yelling back, but he didn’t feel a thing. Like one of
those 3D movies when a big fat ass shark was jumping out of the screen, looking all scary, but was
as dangerous as a gust of wind. Out of the blue Nathan was drowning in light, enlightenment that
nothing could hurt him, nothing could. Just like Josh said, they were different. Just the two of them,
everything else was one big bullshit. It was just a trial, a test, Joshua whispered, another experiment
to keep them in check, to strip them from his uniqueness. Too late, motherfuckers. He had opened
his eyes. Clang. Tap. And that was it.

The person who helped him get up wasn’t his sister though, or even his overprotective mother. It was
Joshua. His brave, older brother decided to protect him against their powerful, angry dad and walked
him to his room afterward. It was Joshua who gave him his favorite toy and cheered him up, talking
slowly and playing games with him. It was Joshua who stole some cookies and juice from the
kitchen when Nathan was forbidden to join the family during the dinner. It was Joshua who
explained everything patiently, telling him that everything would be alright, everything would be just
fine, and they were on the secret mission now.

They were the only ones who were real.

That day, Nathan got really, really scared and confused. Fuck, who wouldn’t be? They were the
only human beings, the only one with real a heart, real thoughts, a real mind. Him and his older
brother. The whole world was just a game, a play that had to take place, and their mission was to
find a way to control it all. Only them. Their father wasn’t real, their mother either. Not even Kris.
Just robots, illusions, like special holograms. No pressure, no rules, no obligation but a code to crack.
It was fucking scary. So, Nathan cried a lot. The little kid had burst into tears, not because he was
hurt, but he didn’t know how to react otherwise. If everybody was fake, he had to be forever alone,
right? No, Joshua said then. You can just play with people like you do with toys. You are not alone
with your toys around, are you? You can just do whatever you want with them. No rules. And you
will never be alone, little brother. I’m always here. I will always be here.

Clang.

He stopped crying and started to smile. Josh hugged him and smiled back. Alright, everything would
be just fine. When their mother visited them secretly bringing even more cookies, she found them
both chocking on their own laugh, hid by the bed and giggling, giggling, giggling, hitting the wall
with their little fists to drown out the suspicious sounds. The monkey helped too, accompanying with

“Don’t stress, little brother,” Joshua smiled widely, reading his thoughts easily. That day Nathan was recalling, was marked in his private calendar as one of the best moments of their lives. One of the first victories. “You know the secret, right? You know…”

“…They are not real.” Nathan finished for him, now partly present, still thinking about the first time he really felt like the only one real and breathing. They heard Caulfield and Price because they wanted it and the universe listened. Kris’ real intentions got revealed because they wanted to know. It wasn’t easy to bend the world to work like it should – for them not against them, but they managed, little by little.

One more proof.

The thing was that Nathan didn’t want to believe in it, didn’t want to be the only one real, especially when Joshua wasn’t around, living his life, traveling, hooking up with the most beautiful girls and partying hard in the most unusual places. The world around him was just a deception created just for his pleasure and for him to rule. Clang. Tap. Beyond the everyday hassle, chains of chores, obligations, and regulations, there was nothing but a magic trick. Fucking fake. It worked for Joshua but not very well for Nathan. Always humiliated, either by colleagues, classmates or his own family, he didn’t feel in charge at all, except when stoned almost to death. Then yeah, maybe then. He kissed Rachel once, but only once and that was it.

The universe didn’t want to listen to him that much.

They never told anyone but Mark Jefferson, and he just nodded. No comment, no shocking response but one simple move of his head. Nathan was wondering if his teacher was also kind of real since he could change the reality or transform his objects, but Joshua wasn’t so sure. They argued about it a few times, but it never got them anywhere. Sometimes it felt convenient to feel that Jefferson was an illusion, especially when he was taking Nathan on his white, spotless desk, in a painful, shameful act. Sometimes. Then Mark seemed so real again.

It was fucking confusing.

Joshua visited Nathan often, but not as frequently to erase any doubts and not being as convincing as he had been previously. Sometimes it was hard to believe that any of this was real, the dashboard, the burnt hole in it, the steering wheel, the rain outside. So, Nathan came to another conclusion, taking another step, this time entirely alone. What if everything was real after all, but…

“You are not real.” He stated, not for the very first time though. Josh sighed deeply but didn’t get angry, hearing those accusations before. Nathan was switching between the veracities, once believing in the secret, sometimes not, and attacking the only person who was having his back all those years.

Fuckwit.

“Here.” Josh took off his precious jacket and put it on Nathan’s lap. The party theme was the 70s, it would fit, and the false confidence sewed between the layers of cloth would help him a bit. “Wear it tonight. It’s getting cold.”

If Joshua expected to be thanked for such a gesture, he was more than mistaken.

“Leave me alone,” Nathan said, not moving an inch, still partially in his nightmare, between the realities, with the red jacket still on his lap. “Leave. Now.” It was simply too much.
His brother shrugged.

“You might need my company tonight.” It took Josh a moment to find another cigarette. Fuck, the pack was almost empty and a bit moldy. Damn rain. “You know they’re trying to hunt you down.” Aware of Nathan’s problems, he wasn’t willing to leave him unprotected. Since Bowers disappeared, the supply of happiness got drastically smaller, and some Blackwell people weren’t pleased how the things turned out. They blamed his little brother for such inconvenience demanding the fix and rejecting any reasonable explanation. It got to the point that Nathan got beat up silently between the lockers and left with a very vocal warning that it was his problem to solve. Not theirs, not Bowers’, but his. They might try again tonight.

Nathan closed his eyes. He was tired of thinking.

“Ten.” The old game of hide-and-seek was their inner signal, a secret mark that he wanted to be left alone. Counting backward was an arcane spell and the only rule his brother decided to uphold. Joshua sensed it coming already and growled peevishly, murmuring something about the fucking kids that never grow up. Nathan held his breath, hoping that he wouldn’t get furious or raise hell, but didn’t lose the count.

“Stop it.” His older brother said.

The small space inside the car became even smaller. Claustrophobic. Two of them, the seats, the dashboard. A tiny, intense hell of smoke.

“Nine, eight, seven, six!” Nathan blurted out. He loved Josh and hated him. He wanted him to stay here forever and didn’t want to see him ever again. Especially now, especially what they heard about Kris. Maybe Caulfield was wrong though, maybe his sister didn’t plan anything nasty, perhaps she was sincere.

He so wanted to believe in that.

“Nat, cut the crap with this fucking game.” He heard his brother getting more and more vexed. “Aren’t we too old for that?”

He would show him what irritation was. With his eyes still tightly shut, Nathan found enough courage to continue. A childhood play- that was his only way out. Hide, but no seek.

“Five!” His fists hit the wheel with every said number. “Four!”

“Asshole.”

“Three, two, one!” His hand slipped and hit the horn at the end. The piercing, loud yell teared through the air, but no one paid attention. It was New Year’s Eve. The flock of students remaining outside, cheered again, assuming that it was another sign of festivity. Celebration indeed, it was time for Joshua to go, to disappear.

“Fine.” His brother pulled the handle, getting out from the car. Lucky guy, it stopped raining just after he stood up. “Just don’t cry when they get you.” Joshua warned and left him alone walking to the school.

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A kaleidoscope of people, vivid colors and pulsating sounds hit him as soon as he passed the doorstep, embracing him with artificial warmth, frenzy heat, and snickers. The switch from an abandoned, grey and dark front yard to this intense, inane feast made Nathan dizzy. Walking through the hallway, he kept wondering how he could believe in such a ridiculous thing. The secret, him being the only one real, good joke. Phenomenal job, bro. Great idea. This whole realm created just for them because God or the universe felt like it. Although the things that Josh was saying were still there, sucking every bit of his sanity out of his marrow. Without him by his side, Nathan felt empty, just like one side of the hourglass, ready to be turned over and be filled again, even though it was just sand, glittering dust, nothing more. He was a walking dead, standing even more dead now, not able to move much, pushed continuously and bumped by other people, who apologized or not, too occupied by tonight’s revelry. Sorry, not sorry most of them said, but at least noticed him for a split second. Like they were real. Like he was. One moment he was full of his own confidence, filled by Josh’s reassurances to the point he wanted to vomit, the very next he felt empty, but not entirely alone condemned to the company of his brother. Back and forth. Up. Down.

“Hi, Nathan, nice outfit.” Somebody stopped him. Warren Graham, yeah, that was this kid’s name. Always too polite for his own good, but a decent dude, as far as Nathan remembered. “Who are you dressed up as?”

A football player, he wanted to say, but it didn’t sound funny even in his head.

“God.” He answered instead, still adjusting to the weight of the jacket and walked past the guy, not even stopping for a chit-chat. There was a god in the 70s, right? Divinity never went out of style. There was nothing he could talk with Warren about though since most of his thoughts were either terribly random or too dark to share. Josh, Kris, Mark, Rachel. Price and Caulfield. The room. The hourglass. This guy wouldn’t understand. Some other people wanted to talk to him, but he brushed them off.

“Not now,” he said, and they listened.

Tap. Nathan patted his watch. Rolex, worth probably more than this whole school altogether. Tap. Not that it mattered. Tap. It did. Not as nice as the hourglass but it would do.

The paints, flags, shades, and tints were making him blind. He walked straight to his locker, turned the knob fast, hit the door twice for good measure and opened it quickly, hiding at least one side of himself from the curious looks. Today the hallway looked like a fucking freak show bursting with cheap synthetic clothing, old sweaters found at the attics, platform shoes and bell-bottom pants, covered by tons of glitter and obscene makeup. His jacket was a good disguise though since no one asked more questions. Pretending to be his awesome brother should feel cheap, but it was actually quite awesome. Anything was better than just being himself.

An idea for an escape became a temptation, a temptation transformed into a need, and the need started burning. A short cry escaped his lips, and he began searching through his textbooks, notes, and photos to find an emergency fix. It should be there, at least a little bit. A pill or two would help him to get into the role, to act his part perfectly or just stop existing for a moment or two. Finding his stash, he swallowed two of the capsules at once and calmed down before the drug started working. It would kick in eventually though, and that was enough to feel safe. Finally. He was already shielded from whichever reality.

“What’s up with the rich freak?” He heard, while still waiting for the pills to take effect. A bunch of football jocks gathered nearby, sharing a stolen bottle of vodka. Every member of this small circle was taking a sip or two and passing it quickly to another one, nervous and excited, as they took part in some secret ritual, not just doodling booze. It was an uncommon view in the Blackwell hallway,
but with all this madness around no one would notice.

“This shit would be hilarious if it wasn’t insane.” Zach Riggings took over the bottle, gulped once and gave it to Hayden. “Prescott needs some tough shit to get back on his feet. He flips like crazy lately. I don’t know what he is on, but dude, he should double the dosage or switch to something less crazy. This guy needs help.”

Fuckers. Always so nice to him when they wanted something, but when certain he wasn’t around, they gossiped like a bunch of kindergarten brats. Nothing new. Nathan knew how much they disliked him, treating him like something between their favorite drug-dealing pet and somebody too miserable to beat up. Not deaf or as stupid as they thought, he heard their quietly whispered insults, accepting the abuse hidden between pleasant smiles and requests for favors. Lunatic, crazy, delusional, he knew all those words. Sure, they called other people names too, but usually in their faces, straightforward, instead of murmuring between the lockers and then pretending that no slur was said.

They weren’t real. They weren’t. All the insults weren’t. It was just a try, a test, a cruel game. But it was hard to believe in it just minutes after he switched himself, telling Josh to go the fuck himself and questioned the big secret.

They weren’t real, please.

Too afraid to call out Sean Prescott’s kid, they could just talk, that was what Josh said. Let them talk, bro. Let the tattlers stay in their little, stinky hole. Rats always plotted and conspired against a cat, dissembling as good buddies, patient friends that pat his shoulder just to laugh at him later, making fun of the way he walked, smiled or even spoke. If not for Josh, they probably would have got him already anyway, beat the shit out of him, shown their disdain and contempt to haunt him down in earnest.

It would never happen though. He was a Prescott. He was Josh’s brother, supposedly immune, innocuous, safe and real.

He shook his head, adjusting the red jacket in the same manner his brother usually did. His fingers trembled a bit as they usually did when he was listening to the words addressed to somebody else, so he clenched his fists and embed himself a bit more between the metal lockers. Clang. Tap. Clang. It wasn’t a good cover, but it worked.

Zach Riggings and his crew didn’t notice him, ignoring the whole world around, pushing, bumping and knocking each other in a supposed ritual or high school brotherhood. The bottle was almost empty and its content started to take a toll on them. Speaking louder and less careful they blathered a bit more.

“Anyway, I heard Price brought a fucking tank of fireworks today.” It was Logan Robertson this time. Big dude, always polite when needed, but unstoppable when on the field or drunk. He never really talked to Nathan, just treating him like a little cockroach, spinning between his feet, not important enough to even greet him from time to time, or something. It didn’t mean Logan was avoiding the goods that Josh and his brother provided. He was just simply one of those guys, who didn’t care enough to even call him names, calling it respect.

“Yeah, just look at her fucking truck.” Hayden Jones giggled. “Dyke has game.”

“Fuck yeah, she does. Have you seen her wifey today? Damn, she might ditch the D, but is still smoking fucking hot.” Zach licked his lips in the way that made Nathan almost jump at his throat. If Price was listening to this, she would eat him alive. Casual locker room talk, nothing uncommon, but
he felt offended somehow. It was his girl, after all, his Rachel and they all knew about it. The whole school knew and probably laughed at it too. Poor Nathan so in love with a fucking lesbian. It was his own burden though, and his friends should treat him with respect at least in this aspect. Nathan was the only one who could call Rachel a whore and fantasize about her. Not those dudes. She. Was. His. Fuck, it hurt. “I miss the times when Amber was the wildest party animal here. And dealing. She was really good at it. Always had the best stuff, not like this lazy bastard.”

Some other very vulgar memories were shared, involving Rachel’s activities during her wild years. She was always provoking and driving them crazy but never crossed the line with any of them. All the members of the Vortex Club, the football team included, were wondering why she never decided to lash out, oblivious of her strong commitment with Price. No one had had any idea that the blue trash was so important to Amber until she had become too significant and the only thing they had left was to joke about it. Yeah, this club, Vortex Club. His club and his team, but the dudes here still dared to call him a freak or worse. His buddies, his people who he should rely on and never fucking could. Clang, said the locker, bothered again by the scratches of his fingers. Tap. Tap. They didn’t care about him listening or not. They didn’t care at all about him. No one did.

On the other hand, Nathan should be grateful they overlooked his presence. A few more sips, a drink here and there and they would start a wild hunt for Prescott, demanding favors in the form of small happy pills he always generously shared with his flock. Thanking him cordially, they would put a few sticky bills in his hands and forget about their reality as eagerly as he liked to. Joshua was right though, since the supply was cut off by Bowers’ unexpected vacation, all those jerks got nervous about their next big high and begun to demand instead of asking. He created the need, just like he was taught to and then the need was tracking him down but now, thankfully, was drinking itself to death. His little stash was getting smaller and was for his private usage only now. Sharing wasn’t an option, especially after what he just heard.

Where the fuck did Bowers go, though?

“Oh yeah, Amber was great. Good, old times. Now she’s dealing something else.” Hayden giggled finishing the bottle. “Nothing left for us, my dudes.”

A long, despicable chortle filled the air. They apparently thought this was a joke, something to make fun of. Nathan felt the fix working slowly, pushing its magic through his veins, filling up his head with a big, bright sun and changing his tongue to a fluffy cloud. He almost smiled at those puns too, detaching himself and not bothered by their gossips anymore. Who cared if they talked about her. Who cared if they laughed at her silly choices. Tap, tap, his fingers drummed on the locker when the door got closed. Clang.

They didn’t notice. They weren’t real after all.

“Too bad only Price is receiving.” Logan chuckled still amused as hell. “I wish they would let me watch at least.”

“Fireworks or the other shit?” Zach tossed the bottle to the trashcan and covered it with an old newspaper. The whole school was partying anyway, but they didn’t want to be caught, not when the night was still young. His cheeks were already flushed and his speech more slurred. His friends weren’t in any better condition though, already in a mood for more.

“Fuck me, both.”

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The next hour was a bliss. Then it got harder to control and to hold the dark far away from himself, as the colors became brighter and the sounds less muted. Switch, switch, another switch, and sadly the reality got back on with one sharp flick. Nathan cursed, still strolling through the hallways, discovering new trials through the intricate maze of rooms, passages, and staircases, catching the last glimpse of long waited concord. The blessedness was running away fast though, just like the sand in the hourglass, the butterflies of sand dripping down to the moment of hard a stop and unpleasant turn. Those pills didn’t work for long though playing a role of a short sort of detachment, not a permanent solution. Even though he would love to get another one, it was better to just keep them for later, perhaps a real emergency, if something unbearable were to happen.

Interspersed and lost between two worlds, Nathan straightened up, and his thoughts went to Kris. His sister was nowhere to be seen, so he calmed down a bit, trying to remember that the universe was working on his behalf. Imagine things, and they would happen, that what Josh always saying. So, he imagined Kris not being here, not even back at all, still writing him sweet and cute emails about the jungle, animals, and the stuff she saw. He even checked his mailbox, but nothing there. Not real. Not real. Clan. Clang. Tap. This or maybe Josh was keeping her busy, or she worked her way back to Gingrich’s pants. Either way, she wasn’t around. Good. Great. Fucking amazing. He wouldn’t be able to stand her presence tonight, not after the meeting in the room. THE room.

Then it hit him. Jesus Christ, how could he forget. Mark. Photos. Objects. The project. Joshua mentioned something about talking to Jefferson and Nathan knew very well that if those two came up with a plan, it could be deadly, even if by definition no one should get hurt. Kris, real or not, wasn’t an object material, she didn’t need any transformation, and her purity was more than questionable. Joshua wouldn’t care though, using this opportunity to get rid of her or just simply force her to change her ways and obey him. He didn’t care about art or the act of transition. The whole operation was only an excuse to take revenge on people he didn’t like or liked too much. Like Kate Marsh. Or Juliet. Or Kelly.

Or even Samantha, she was the first one, who discovered their secret, who started to ask questions with this stupid, kind look on her face. Nathan tried to explain, but Josh didn’t even let him finish, beating, punching and kicking her out of nowhere. Crying and asking them to stop Samantha tried to protect herself, begging Nathan to do something. He wanted but couldn’t. No one ever was able to stop Josh when he set his mind on something. No one. Clang. Tap. Even Mark.

Somewhere, at the end of the corridor, he heard a few first tunes of the familiar song. The theme from “The Sound of Music” was melting with the loud jokes, laughs, and clatter of friendly parleys. The movie, an old classic was one of his forced favorites. Nathan had learned to love it, watching it so many times with Josh when they got locked down in their room as a form of punishment. No TV, no internet, no toys, just four walls to separate them from everybody else. It was the only available VHS tape that was working and could entertain them both with some sound and moving pictures since everything else was taken downstairs to the living room. No one expected those two boys to watch this crap, so it got forgotten. But they did watch it, over and over, to the point they could recall every second of this boring, old film- every cut, song, and tune. Joshua was always laughing while watching it, especially when the action took place in the mountains. He loved the mountains. The hills were alive, he liked to say. They fucking were alive, but not real, like everything else.

It was getting worse, as the song began to vibrate slowly, echoing between the tall, hundred-year-old walls, becoming more substantial and greedier. Nathan couldn’t find the source of it, first lurking into the opened classrooms, then just walking fast by the passage of lockers. The soft whistle appeared and vanished between his steps, playing with him and driving him crazy. Somebody was humming the tune gently not only for their own comfort and pleasure but to lure him in. Somebody underneath,
somebody who KNEW.

“Josh?” He asked quietly, but no one responded.

The hallway that had been filled with people suddenly became empty. It was just him and the sound. A soft whistle broke in with a giggle and then started again accompanied by tiny little clangs.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He started running. Fast. Faster. The song was there, it was teasing him, daring him to find the source, mocking and encouraging. He passed the cafeteria, the principal’s office, chem lab, slowed down by the bathroom and sped up only to stop abruptly just by Jefferson’s classroom. Pause. Nathan listened carefully. Tap. One second. Tap. Second one. Nothing. The song disappeared, got cut off. Was it Mark doing it then? Hoping that he could find his teacher and some of his answers inside, Nathan noticed that the door was opened, and the light was on. Did Joshua get here first? Did they already get Kris? No, it would take planning, hours of collaboration, discussion and sometimes arguing with a few moments on the white desk, as always.

He peered inside, and his heart stopped.

Mark Jefferson, obviously in a great mood, was sitting on his own desk in a casual, informal pose, sipping a drink from a red, party cup and discussing something with somebody that Nathan didn’t expect to see. Here. Not now. Rachel Price, dressed in a Blackwell cheerleader outfit, with golden, black and red stripes, smiled every time her teacher looked at her or agreed with her comment or remark. Fascinated and utterly obsessed by Mark she tried so hard to impress him with her semi-clever innuendos and wasted every minute of his spare time with her presence and supposedly smart wits. Nathan’s ears lit up almost expecting her to start chanting or humming the tune that lured him here, but he heard nothing, not even a tap.

His teacher didn’t notice his arrival nor his rapid approach, still listening to Rachel with pure pleasure, or so it looked like. Nathan knew Mark wasn’t even remotely interested in her, playing with her curiosity just like a collector enjoying a butterfly’s dance before pinning it to the display. The insects were usually dead when it happened, he reminded himself, either dead or unconscious. She was damn fucking alive and kicking though, thankfully, still.

The way Rachel was dressed almost cost Nathan a painful shriek. It had to be just a costume though since she didn’t get involved in sports very often. Too many smokes and beer, he assumed, or maybe she saved her whole energy for Price. It didn’t mean she would miss the opportunity to show off her beauty and provoke everybody who couldn’t have her with barely covered cleavage. The skirt was too short too. Fuck, no. Fuck, yes. They were so engaged in the conversation that they didn’t notice him standing by the doorstep with his mouth open and heart racing.

“…Pinnacle of which, is your cheerleader outfit.” Jefferson finished a sentence that Nathan didn’t hear starting. Maybe the universe had a hiccup and forgot to kick in, just like a video game paused for too long. Then Jefferson pointed at the smiling girl, Nathan’s girl for fuck’s sake, like he expected a special cheerleading routine to praise his words. Judging the way Rachel stared at him, it might happen, especially if the door wasn’t open and the light was off.

Slut.

She stretched in a way that made Nathan’s blood boil. She was always doing it in such a way that would drive him crazy, baiting, stimulating and apparently on purpose. Girls just didn’t look like that because they wanted to. They all had a secret agenda, trapping and summoning, not allowed to tease by accident. Mark didn’t react, already resistant and immune to such temptations, keeping a safe
distance and sipping on his drink. He was seeing her for what she really was. A beautiful object, armed with some alluring tricks, a great creation but not really worth his attention. Not up to his taste, not physically at least. A butterfly ready to be pinned in his collection of challenges, a butterfly that Nathan would do everything to kiss right now.

“I didn’t have anything else in my closet that would fit the theme, and those uniforms are pretty outdated. Plus, it’s my last year in high school.” He heard Rachel saying. “I found it fitting.” She smoothed out her short skirt, pretending that decency was somehow a familiar term for her. “It might be the last time I’m wearing it without finding a believable excuse or waiting till Halloween. It’s my farewell to cheering up people that I don’t care about.”

A slight smirk appeared and vanished on Jefferson’s face, but he didn’t make a single attempt to take what was presented in front of him. He could, Nathan was sure of it. One word and Rachel Amber, oh fuck that shit, Price, would spread her legs and forget about being a dyke in a second. Otherwise, why would she even be here?

She is not real, he reminded himself. She is just a creation, a dream, nothing more. Something to conquer when all the tests get passed and then enslaved if he wanted to. Tap. Clang. It was so hard to believe in it though, but in this case, he really wanted to believe. He wanted her no matter the cost.

“Starting the new year with a definite stance, I see.” Mark tilted his head, as though trying to read her mind without saying a word. Guessing her intentions was one of his preferred games, and he didn’t find many enjoyable. There was no question that this outfit was somehow a secret gift for Chloe, like everything in Rachel’s life. He found it amusing and terribly imprudent at the same time, but somehow fascinating. Talking about her wife, she grew a habit of sharing her plans with him, discussing the hidden meaning behind her moves and motives, feeling the need to simply share or to find acceptance. Something between a girly gossip and a confession with a touch of strange facetiousness. He was fine with it, clandestinely delighted with twisting her mind, deflating her self-confidence, or growing it like a potted plant. They both enjoyed their little chats though, even if the game was rigged from the get-go. Rachel didn’t have many opportunities to challenge herself while with Chloe, not in that way at least, as her girl was too much of an open book expecting the same in return. Reading between the lines wasn’t the blue pirate’s forte anyway, and too many weird subtle inquiries were driving her mad. Direct honesty was more to her liking, and Rachel loved her for it even if it strived for some variety in human contact. “However, as the crude science confirms, the more we try to prove our dislike, mock our lifestyle we attempt to discard, the more we actually desire it.” He finished, confusing her a bit more.

“Are you suggesting that I want to become a cheerleader again?” She crossed her arms on her chest as always when somebody didn’t agree with her. Not a lot of people had the courage to do so, teachers included, but Jefferson couldn’t care less. They had been talking long enough, spending hours of supposedly meaningful discussions, he was able to afford to be offensively harsh, not betraying his good guy appearance.

“I’m suggesting that you’ve never stopped being one, even if you really tried or thought that the time for that kind of play… had passed.” His tone was gentle, but the words cruel in the low undertones. She noticed though but still decided to face it. Poor, brave girl. “There is still a part in you that wants to be part of the oldest high school game and cheer for people you don’t care about, even if you would never admit it. Our desires don’t always meet who we are or who we wish to become. You want to abridge the last year of your adolescence, crack the code of adulthood with an outfit that is the most visible remains of the cheerful vagary of your youth. Do you think you will wake up a different person tomorrow?”

Sniffling, she turned to the side like this conclusion slapped her in the face but she wasn’t offended
enough to walk off. Preferably, she would find a perfect retort and serve it with a short smirk like nothing had happened. Jefferson was waiting for it, Nathan too.

While waiting, Mark condescendingly offered her a drink in a plastic red cup to cheer her up a little. Rachel shook her head, refusing quickly. It would be humiliating to hide behind this thing and on top of everything she wasn’t sure what was poured in it. A teacher wouldn’t dare to offer her any alcohol, but she didn’t want to risk it, still not trusting him fully with such a simple thing as liquor but opening up her mind without a big push. Mark Jefferson became intriguingly friendly lately though, to the point that it confused Rachel. Obviously, it was very pleasing that a member of the faculty could be smitten by her, even if only in a platonic, intellectual type of way. On the other hand, it started to trouble her, making her oddly uncomfortable. They indeed clicked, established a special connection that was hard to define, chatting like they had known each other forever. The fascination wasn’t physical for sure, but the fact that she couldn’t put her fingers on was going on between them was driving her crazy. What did he want from her? Why did he always find a moment or two to talk about things that weren’t as thought-provoking? It almost felt like cheating, sharing some very personal stories and very intimate thoughts with somebody who wasn’t Chloe, but she couldn’t help herself and was coming back to him, determined for another conversation that always felt like dancing on a thin line.

“The vagary couldn’t be more cheerful at the moment. And I’m waking up a little bit different every day. A little bit better. Don’t we all, Mark?” She smiled, finally striking back. Calling him by his first name was always taking him aback, tangling the rhythm of his speech. Dosed carefully it was giving her hella leverage.

He hid behind the cup. Small victories.

“Point taken. Very well. So, this skirt…” Jefferson never touched her, appropriately or not. Even his gesture towards her skirt was very subtle, showing the respectable distance he always kept. If he ever tried, she would leave this classroom in a second and never come back having an excuse for herself to cut off this weird relation. “…is the twilight of your transformation?”

“Perhaps.” Rachel nodded. “Taking it off would be a truly a coming of age moment.”

Tap. Tap. Breathing. Nathan had a problem with breathing, forgetting how the air actually worked. It was something about taking an inhale and releasing the painful steam from the inside, but now it was better not to try it at all. Rachel fucking Price was babbling about stripping with her fucking teacher. With his teacher. With his Mark. Jealous, yeah, he was jealous but in a very ambiguous way. Jefferson had him, even if it was more or less a trade, a forced activity that was part of Nathan’s commitment to the project. Rachel rejected him so many times, but was still in his mind, worshipped and adored as the future, ultimate partner. Only her. Seeing them, listening to them, talking so casually about those things almost made him howl.

But he didn’t, yet. Tap.

“I’m sure it will be.” Jefferson just shrugged, but his curiosity grew, fueling the need to dig deeper and learning more about her true desires. The school would probably assume she wanted to seduce her teacher, but Mark knew it wasn’t the case. He was too old, and she was too smart for that nonsense. Everybody had a secret though, Rachel wasn’t an exception, and he found himself more than absorbed to peel her confidence down to the bare bone, finding the real reason why she was who she was. “Ideation of such a shift is really appealing. Are you planning to ritually burn it down?”

Rachel narrowed her eyes.
“Maybe.”

“Please send my regards to Chloe Price then.” They both smirked. “Too far?” Joking around with her teacher in that manner seemed odd, but Rachel got used to it by now. Weird, strange. However, her life was nothing but ordinary anyway. “Good that you know your limits and mine, Nathan?” Suddenly, Mark turned around, finally sensing his pupil’s presence. He had to sense it since the young Prescott didn’t make a sound still covering himself with his own shadow. “Can you wait a minute? I’m in the middle of something.”

“I have urgent…” Nathan looked at him, then at Rachel, who bowed her head and smiled wryly. Slut. Whore. His. Own. Fuck. “Of course, Mr. Jefferson. I’m sorry.” He then turned around and ran out of the classroom as fast as he could.

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He took another pill shortly after, then wandered around the corridors a bit more. The party was dope, he conjectured. The army of drunk people, swinging, guzzling and sprinkling the glitter around, were watching the clocks and fostering a hope that the new year would bring them solace, all of their dreams coming true. The college students showed up as well, so the crowd thickened, becoming denser and more unstoppable. All the voices around him became one big, fucking scream.

That was a definition of a good high school lash out, or so he assumed. Nathan never really liked to party though, always adopting the idea it was his obligation and duty or an excellent way to forget about a few things. Josh was always better in it anyway, taking all the spotlight and getting attention even if he didn’t want to. He was better in everything though, always, in everything.

No one sprinkled the glitter on Nathan though. No one even tried.

He wanted to go home, but he wasn’t allowed to, representing the ruling dynasty and faking that everything was just fine. The reality was getting heavier though, more exhausting as he tried to find himself a goal, a thing to do. Not even chit-chat happened, no single drink was served, no one asked him to dance. Good, he assumed, gods didn’t dance. The red jacket on his back was supposed to change him into a divinity, but for the most part, made him feel like shit. Rachel. Mark. Rachel. Mark. Even the cloud wasn’t that fluffy anymore, less soft and unformattable, with sharp edges of veracity, poking his arm from time to time.

And then somebody bumped into him, almost knocking him down. “Missed me, little brother?” As always Joshua seemed to have a lot of fun. With his cheeks red and the eyes wild he already had some crazy stories to tell. The party animal and the idol of Blackwell High didn’t miss a single occasion to show his dominance and take advantage of everything that the world was offering, and it was offering plenty. “Did you talk to Mark?”

“No, he was busy.”

“With your Rachel.” A strong arm landed on his shoulder. His brother shook him a bit and grabbed him closer slowly walking forward. “Damn, she’s looking smoking hot tonight. I would fucking score if she wasn’t for you. Hey, chill. Cheer up.” Josh winked in this smooth, blunt way that was always making Nathan sick to his stomach. “Fuck this bitch, she will beg you to fuck her. Really! She will drop to her fucking knees, giving you sixty-nine reasons why you really should bang her hard. A few more days, maybe weeks and she will be all yours. In the meantime, look at this sea of
opportunities. So many good pussies tonight, we should party, bro! Take one for a photo session or a double one!” Smiling happily, he looked like a kid in a candy store.

“Sure.” Nathan sighed, still not able focus on anything else than this golden, black and red cheerleader outfit. “Why does Mark spend so much time with her?”

Josh shrugged, not bothered at all. His brother’s admiration towards this blonde cunt was getting boring. One fucking kiss and he couldn’t get her out of his mind, living on pure hope and torturing himself with his own failures. Price was just a distraction or Amber wanted to experiment a bit, which was entirely fine. According to the laws of the universe, he defined himself, at some point she should be Nathan’s regardless. With Mark’s help or without. With a lovely evening in the darkroom or without a nice trip, Rachel Amber would belong to his brother, begging him to do everything he wanted. It didn’t mean Nathan should miss out in the meantime.

“Because he is bored out of his mind like everybody in this shithole! Or he is testing her for you! Or… I don’t know!” Josh snorted and tangled his hair a bit. “Remember when he said she’s out of our reach? I’m sure it’s part of his plan. And he never failed us with his plans, right?”

“Right.” Nathan nodded, still not fully convinced. What if Jefferson wanted her for himself? Maybe not to fuck, but somehow? Like she was reserved, booked already, pinned to the display that wasn’t his and he would have to give up? What if…

The brothers strolled in silence for a moment, not bothered by anyone. Some of the students gave them a look, not very pleasant but let them be. The Prescotts weren’t very much loved lately, and since they were spoon fed their whole life forcing the respect instead of gaining it, people relished hating them. There were always gossips about them though, they were Prescotts, so Josh didn’t care much, and Nathan at least tried to follow his steps. Walking arm in arm, he somehow forgot about the rumors completely and enjoyed the dry silence even more, until they heard a high-pitch voice they both knew very well.

“Well, shit.” Josh tucked his thumbs behind his belt waiting for the girls to come closer. Absorbed only by themselves, Victoria, Taylor, and Courtney kept babbling about their outfits, makeup, and plans for today, casually switching to the topic of the year from time to time. Not surprisingly it was about them though. The Prescott name always meant hot stuff, but this time more like proverbial hot coal in stockings though.

“Is he still trying to get a hold of you?” One of the chicks asked Victoria, which just finished her tirade about how terrible the sophomore girls looked. Nathan always assumed that his former so-called friend attended those events, not to enjoy herself, but to talk shit about others.

“Not really, he is busy with his sister or something. I’m grateful.” Click, click. Tap, tap. Hiding her phone, Victoria sighed theatrically and stopped a few feet away from them. As always, she didn’t look around waiting to be seen, not observing much. “I don’t want any more drama. I’ve wasted way too much of my precious time, trying to save him from his ugly personality. Oh well, we all learn from our mistakes. Did you hear back from Kate Marsh by the way? I heard the Catholic girl is coming back next semester. I was wondering what…” And then she whispered something to her little group, smiling like a little fucking snake.

Kate Marsh, such a sweet, carrying and cute creature. Nathan liked her a lot actually, appreciating their little talks and short walks. She always listened to him, even smiled at his awkward jokes but then she became a problem. Tap. Tap. Something went wrong. Tap. Something that was related to “The Sound of Music”. Clang. Something that he shouldn’t know about at all, that’s what Josh said, and if those bitches were right, the problem was coming back now.
The universe didn’t want to listen to him anymore.

“Fuck, she knows.” He whispered in panic. “Fuck, she knows.”

“She doesn’t know shit.” Joshua hissed back. “I will shut her up, don’t you worry.”

“Speaking of the devil.” They got noticed, so his brother straightened up and turned to them swiftly, acting surprised. Fancy to see you too, his furred eyebrow was saying, as Josh always played his part perfectly. Nathan wasn’t that great of doing anything as well as his brother, scratching his nose instead and surrendering all the limelight to his older sibling. It would get stolen from him anyway, there was no point in fighting over it.

“Victoria Chase and her little blair bitch project.” Josh spat on the floor, somehow finding a few grapes in his pocket and chewing on them again. The seeds spattered on the clean, light brown floor, dazzling in halogen light. Nathan wiped his lips, noticing that there is blood on his hand. He must have had to bite his tongue hard, or maybe it was a nosebleed. It happened from time to time when he was taking to many of the pills, or the cloud was too thick.

Chase didn’t even shrug, letting one her minions to lead the first attack. Always trying to get Josh’s attention, she was still licking her wounds after being rejected. Nathan’s brother didn’t even want to fuck her, calling her a witch from hell and mercifully hanging out with her from time to time, accepting her worship and silly, hackneyed praise. Finally aware that she didn’t have a chance. Chase first tried revenge, then gossips and then playing cold and ignoring both brothers to the point she declined any kind of interaction. Thankfully, she had minions and now one of them, an annoying blonde, jumped on them ready to tear them apart if her owner asked her to do so. Taylor, yeah, her name was Taylor. Why had anybody gone through the trouble of giving her a name?

“First of all, it’s Miss Bitch for you.” She barked, like an annoying little puppy. Nathan peered at Victoria, but the lady of Blackwell was keeping a safe distance, pretending she didn’t see what was happening ten feet away from her. “Second, do you understand what this acronym stands for? Beautiful, intelligent that causes hard-ons. Do you know how insults work, little boy, or do you need special guidance?”

Chewing his grapes, Joshua listened to the whole monologue watching his fingernails intensely. They were dark and dirty, still filthy from the junkyard ground and sticky from the grape juice. Nathan wondered if his brother ever washed his hands.

“That was pretty fucking pathetic.” He summed up when she finished yapping. “Are you five?”

“Taylor, for fuck’s sake…” Chase rolled her eyes and almost bit her tongue. Fuck, she was not supposed to say anything. Ah, damn it. Taylor was so bad though. Really fucking awful. “What do you want?” She finally turned to the brothers, afraid that her perfectly created image would get even more damaged by such pitiful defenders.

“Warn you.” Joshua cut to the chase, still remaining calm and somehow charming. Even his smile was adorable, just to deceive her a bit. Then he tensed up. “Shut your mouth. Stop talking. Do you know how silence sounds? Try that.”

“Or what?” She lifted up her chin.

“Some people paid a very high price for being too curious or too loud.”

Playing games and beating around the bush wouldn’t work with Nathan’s brother, so Victoria let the chips fall where they may. The whole school was listening anyway, already familiar with his crimes
and all the attempts to intimidate her. The Prescotts could own the school but couldn’t hide all their sins. It was time to show him their place, and it wasn’t nice and cozy.

“Yeah, with broken ribs, concussion, and post-traumatic stress disorder. I know how you operate, Prescott. I’ve seen it. What?” She sneered seeing how fast they both backtracked. “You think I didn’t know what you did to Samantha? I was tolerating your reckless behavior way too long.”

“Lies!” Josh hissed but didn’t come any closer. Why hassle to fight with a dream though, Nathan thought. They weren’t real, it’s just some nightmare or a cloud that went wrong.

Clang. Tap. He could swear the song was whistled again. Somebody was mocking them even now. No one except Nathan noticed though or didn’t really care.

“There are no lies, Prescott. I don’t want anything to do with you, now or ever. Go fuck your-selfie and have a nice rest of your life that doesn’t include me.” Then Victoria noticed his hands way too close to her throat. Adjusting her shirt, she tried to push him back, but Josh was way too strong. Smiling in a very nasty way, he didn’t look upset or even agitated, the cold certainty scared her even more. “What are you doing? Stop! Fucking stop!”

“You think you can just send me away? I’m not your fucking dog, Victoria.” His fingers were caressing her neck slowly, one attempt away from a squeeze. Josh would love to break this tiny, little throat, crush it hard, very hard. “You can’t tell me what to do! I’m tired of everybody telling me what to do!”

The panic in her eyes grew more visibly, even if she tried to hide it with another supercilious gesture. The familiar fear paralyzed her again. The same fucking dread that she had experienced in the old RV seeing how far Prescott’s rage could go. Feeling his palms clenching on her neck, Victoria Chase was scared to death, even if surrounded by friends and allies, that did nothing more than watch.

“Leave me alone, Prescott! Remember where you are.” She hissed, losing all her confidence. Taylor and Courtney just gasped but didn’t interfere, too afraid or maybe way too excited. Knowing them, Victoria should be surprised they didn’t film it. Where were their phones when she needed proof of Prescott’s instability?

“This is my school!” Joshua howled. Always mentally unhinged, he successfully hid behind his charm and appeal, but had already crossed the line between a sweet boy and the demon dog from hell. “Arcadia is mine! Blackwell is mine! I rule this place. I rule everything, you hear me? And you… You are just a fucking nothing. Nothing! I should’ve shown you…”

“Hey, get away from her!” He got pushed so hard, that he hit the wall and almost landed on his knees. The lockers clanged in a chaotic clatter when he tried to get up. Someone’s strong hands grasped on his shirt, dragging him away and pushing down, this time way more decisively.

Joshua shook his head, showing his teeth like a wild animal preparing for a battle. He was in luck today, both of them were. Chloe Price was slowly becoming his main enemy, not only because of her association with Rachel but because she was so fucking annoying and always getting into his business. A guard dog they called her; a barking, blue mutt that didn’t mind using her fists when asked. Looking at her, Nathan was sure she had a drink or two and her fury was fueled not only by a majestic sense of justice but good old booze.

“Let me go!” Josh tried to hit Price, but she avoided his fist swiftly. Drunk or not, she was damn good with deceiving him. “The fuck? What? A big lesbo to the rescue?”
Nathan swallowed hard, watching his blundering attempts to get her, but Price was always a step away or not reachable, escaping his punches. He aimed at her face, guts, even tried to kick her but miraculously she was still dancing around him keeping Victoria safe. The fashion snake was a monstrous bitch, and Chloe really wouldn’t mind pushing her into the ocean a few more times. However, seeing that absolutely no one wanted to stop Prescott forced her to act against her wishes. Fuck that shit, no dickhead would choke a girl in front of the whole school even if this one deserved to burn in hell.

What are you doing, Chloe, she thought. What the fuck did you just put yourself into? He should fucking stop at some point, seeing that it’s fucking pointless. He should just turn back and run away. She didn’t touch him again though, just tiring him down and keeping him far away from Victoria and her friends. It reminded her of the old times when she had always been pushing herself to the limit, getting into trouble by accident or on purpose. No wit was half and half.

Josh didn’t want to stop though. Josh was always winning, always.

“Nice company you keep, Chase. Lowering your standards much?” Nathan didn’t want to take part in it but seeing his dear brother slowly losing his ground, didn’t have a choice. Then again seeing Victoria in cahoots with Chloe was more hurtful than a slap to his face. The world turned upside down again showing its real face, smiling with sharp, nasty fangs. It was them against all of those assholes, always alone, with no one else to trust. Victoria was his friend, a companion, part of his crowd and now decided to betray him so easily only because Josh got a bit angry. Just like that. Snap. Switch.

Bitch.

The Blackwell queen, more than grateful for a surprised rescue, crossed arms on her chest and looked at the brothers with a visible despise. Breathing fast she was still trying to calm down and play though. It was just an inconvenience, not a big deal, but fuck, thank God for Chloe Price.

“Says the guy who wants to put his dick in Rachel Amber…” Blue eyes of a certain pirate flashed dangerously. Victoria licked her lips and added quickly. “…Price. Sorry. No offense.”

Chloe, already regretting standing up for Victoria, sighed deeply but didn’t walk away. Their personal conflict was almost legendary, but the hatchet got buried in the face of bigger trouble. They might hate each other, but there was one thing the blue pirate hated more- Prescott. Him and his constant whining, his endless begging of Rachel’s attention mixed with his ridiculous outbursts of fury, and even if Chase crossed the line with her little supposedly witty comment, it was enough for the blue rebel to step up even more furiously. Yeah, those guys were assholes. Sick, degenerated fucks who needed some special help, preferably far away from Arcadia Bay and from them all in general. It would be wiser to just let them be though, rotting inside their twisted mind and go her own way, but this time she couldn’t resist. Maybe it was because of Ma crying silently every time they saw Kris and Steph chatting, perhaps it was the looks that everybody gave Rachel tonight, maybe it was the super strong drink she swallowed in one gulp, or maybe she sensed it wasn’t just an innocent struggle between the lockers. Anyway, Chloe Price wouldn’t mind kicking somebody’s ass and release some fucking steam with the good old fashion style. The whiskey didn’t help to keep her drive in check.

“Boo-fucking-hoo, a rich boy has a meltdown. Go find your dog house, Prescott. Fetch! Sniff.” She pushed Nathan this time, who blinked in total surprise. It was usually Josh who got hit, not him. It wasn’t his fight. The fuck? “Lick your balls. I don’t care. Just leave everybody the fuck alone!”

The students gathered around them like a flock, not willing to miss the show. The more they hissed and puffed, pushing each other or avoiding the hit and exchanging more or less painful slurs, the
more the mass was chatting, whistling and yelling. Amused as during a football game, they all wanted to see how it would end, counting on some blood or a spilled tooth at least. Their enthusiasm was turning Josh on, so he laughed, opening his arms widely and almost claiming a breathtaking victory but then noticed that no one was really cheering for them. Those bastards were on Price’s side. Her and Victoria’s.

“You’re teaming up with her?” Nathan also couldn’t believe it. “Against me? The fuck?”

“You’re making a mistake. One, big, fucking mistake!” His brother shrieked as his mood switched again. Now, even more furious, he really wanted to show what he is capable of. “She is no one. No one!”

Victoria looked at Chloe, but the blue pirate could only offer a shrug for an explanation. She so didn’t want to continue, not only because of the attention she got, but it just felt stupid and unnecessary. Beating up or even calling Prescott names didn’t lead anywhere except to a lovely visit to the principal’s office and Chloe would prefer to avoid it. Wells never listened to the believable version of events anyway, always making up some shit to cover up for the brothers.

“Yeah, sure.” Cage fights weren’t the blue pirate’s specialty, even if she liked to imagine otherwise. Damn, Rachel would give her so much shit for it or laugh her ass off. “Bark away, Prescott. That’s all you can do.”

“You have no fucking idea what who I am! You don’t know what I can do! What I can…” He pushed her. Oh great.

“What? Expel me?” She pushed him back. Not that hard though, just a punch. “Call your rich daddy or your older sister and cry them a river because a big, fucking lesbo just kicked your ass? Go ahead. Or maybe you would man up now and punch me in the face in front of the whole school? C’mon Prescott, you like to hit girls, don’t you, huh? Don’t you? You are just nothing but fucking dirt.”

Clang. Clang. Nathan lowered his head. Josh sniffled but stayed in place not sure how to react.

The old news about Samantha became a common knowledge thanks to Victoria who decided to inform everybody about the tragedy, not shying over the details. Even the members of the faculty were shocked and demanded some serious answers. Mark Jefferson held a special meeting last week trying to explain that Samantha was a very confused young lady and she didn’t need any attention, especially that kind. Gaping and blinded with anticipation, people enjoyed the gossip though, and the story escalated to the point that the poor girl wasn’t only beaten by Prescott, but also raped, tortured and almost killed. Chloe, who was more than accustomed with the rumors, just shrugged, already aware how sick the Prescott family could be. Victoria got what she wanted though. Nathan’s reputation got utterly damaged, and most people started to avoid him even more eagerly than before, too afraid to call him out or ask for his side of the story.

“I can crush you. I can crush you so fast that you wouldn’t even notice. Enjoy while you can, Price. Your time will come.” Grabbing her beanie, Josh threw it on the floor and spat noisily. Fortunately for her, he missed his target, but Chloe didn’t care much- laundry existed.

“Oh, for sure. Just remind me when this is actually gonna happen, because all the invitations you keep sending already expired.” She sneered, not impressed by his unstoppable passage of threats. With her hair covering her eyes, the blue pirate seemed even more dangerous and willing to fight than before.

Nathan had to try to stop them. It wasn’t even about the consequences from the school or their father, but it was going too far. He tried to hold Josh’s elbow, but his brother broke away ready for the final
confrontation. Starting to circle around her, he grinned again. His fast steps were screeching on the laminated floor of the school arena.

Chloe felt stupid, like an asshole that everybody expected her to be. Looking around she noticed that the crowd wanted her to hit this bastard, beat him good, for all of them or for the sake of a good fight, but suddenly she felt tired. Josh tried to jump at her a few times, but she avoided his attacks, aware of the ridiculousness of this situation. He wanted to create a freaking fight club in the middle of Blackwell because she didn’t let Victoria Chase get strangled. It wasn’t exactly how she wanted to say goodbye to the old 2013. Good thing, Rachel wasn’t around.

“Don’t provoke me!” Josh warned her again. Then he paused, swore loudly and abruptly started to retrace his steps fast. “Oh, great.” He hissed, backing off and then ran away from the scene before the person who just appeared among the crowd would start any drama. Kris yelled something and pushed forward but got blocked by dozens of bodies who wanted to keep their seats in the first row and would fight for it if necessary. Surprised and staggered, Nathan stood there for a second longer, but rushed after his brother, shoving people around and trying to escape as fast as the Blackwell horde let him.

“Nathan?” Kris shouted, but he didn’t turn back. The people were splitting and parting not trying to stop him, still giggling and laughing at his face. Pathetic jerk running away. Fucking asshole afraid of the blue punk. “Hey, Nathan? Nathan!” Seeing that her brothers are out of her reach, she turned to Victoria. “What’s going on here?”

Chase and her clique ostentatiously overlooked her question, paying more attention to smoothening their outfits and staring at their phones. Kris scoffed, still remembering Victoria very vividly in her younger, less final form. This girl had always meant trouble, and she never understood why Nathan was willing to spend so much time with her and even wrote about the Blackwell queen, calling her a friend. Kris doubted if this chick could be a friend to anyone except herself, but she kept this comment for herself only, damn grateful that she graduated high school a long time ago.

“Just assholes being assholes,” Chloe answered, finding her beanie, dusting it off and putting it back. Damn, she was too old for this shit. Not very keen on explaining the situation to the person she had no intention to share a word with, the blue rebel limited herself to one more mumble. “One in particular.”

“Does he often act like this?” Nathan’s sister asked, looking at Victoria, Chloe and then the rest of the crowd. As with a touch of a magic wand, Steph appeared by her side looking concerned, like it was Kris who almost got punched in the guts, not Chloe. The blue pirate winced, but it wasn’t the right moment to discuss things with the DND queen.

“Well, the question is: when does he not.” She delivered an explanation since no one else did.

Victoria, who magically remembered how to speak, now decided to make a stance. Straightening up she walked up to Kris nonchalantly and put a hand on her shoulder with a terribly fake concern. One of the minions snapped a photo of this important moment. Chloe rolled her eyes.

“I don’t know if you have any influence on your brother, or anybody has any control over him, but I really hope you will help him to solve his… issues.” The distressed pause was delivered with a long, concerned sigh. “Better sooner than later, and preferably far away from there. I’ve heard your family likes to send people on unplanned vacations, so I think he would really benefit from one of those. Like infinite an one. And Kris…” Victoria’s smile was so sweet that the blue pirate almost got diabetes. “Welcome back to Arcadia Bay. I hope it still feels like home.”

The Prescott’s daughter stared at her for a second, chewing on her words.
“More than you think, Victoria.” She responded slowly. “More than you think.”

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The night was cold, wrapped with a black and blue curtain of the dying rain. His steps drummed on the wet pavement, echoing in the dead space of the outside. Blinking traffic lights and a few, dispersed lampposts were the only source of dim, thin light, changing Blackwell’s front yard into a ghost town, inhabited, forgotten and abandoned. Just a memory, a world between worlds, not a meeting spot holding the most important event of the year.

Thundering and thumping, the low pulse of the song played inside transformed into a drumming rhythm with an unrecognizable melody and lyrics. So loud in the cafeteria and among the school’s corridors, the sound was dissolving in a soft, fuzzy darkness. The hurricane of people was locked down inside though, except a few who drank too much and stepped outside for a gasp of fresh air, never leaving the main stairway and quickly getting back. No one wanted to miss out tonight. No one wanted to be left out.

He found Josh by the elm tree, still gasping and puffing in anger, hitting the naked and damaged trunk with his bare hands. Punch after punch, his brother couldn’t stop until the whole anger was gone and this terrible, humiliating feeling of failure would go away. A few more strikes, a bleeding hand bristling with splinters and this fight would become one, not outstanding, forgettable memory. Josh was always winning. He was born to win.

“We have to get rid of her. We have to.” He said after one solid punch that shook the dark silhouette of the tree. “I wanted to do it peacefully, and I hoped that Mark will find a way, but I’m done. I’m so done.” If Nathan didn’t know any better, he could swear his brother wept. “The fuck, what an annoying little whore.” It might be a trickery of light, but Josh’s face looked blood-stained like he just walked off from a boxing ring, not a yapping contest. Price barely touched him though, but his cheeks were scratched and bruised. Nathan didn’t have to ask, he knew. They could read each other’s minds after all.

“What do you want to do?” He asked simply.

“Well…” Joshua spat on the ground, holding onto the tree. Exhausted, he hardly could talk between one heavy breath and another. “There is one way. Only one.” He cleared his throat and then looked him straight in the eyes. “Don’t you have a rifle?”

The traffic lights changed from green to yellow, then blinked and turned red, stopping no one since the street was entirely empty. The Blackwell area wasn’t suffering from heavy traffic even during rush hour but now looked even more secluded. Empty streets, blank paths, just the two of them and the vanishing echo of the drumming hooves, enchanted in the main building.

“You want to…” Nathan choked on his breath. “You want to… Kill…”

“Not kill. Punish.” Lowering his head, Josh wiped his face now avoiding his brother’s terrified gaze. “Just teach her a lesson. Final Lesson. It’s the only way, Nat. Revenge. Payback. Finally showing them who is in charge. Who is the real one, you get me?” He patted the trunk as if the old elm was his good friend and hadn’t just suffered from a severe beating a few breaths ago. “You wanted to celebrate tonight, do something special. This would be so special. And…” Josh smiled lightly. “…
There is a reason why you got this rifle, Nattie boy. You, not me.”

The rifle. Nathan shook his head and took a step back. He remembered how nice it felt, how perfectly it nestled in his hands, how pleasant was the click of the new, freshly oiled bolt. Too tempted to touch it again, Nathan hid it in his closet, deeply behind his expensive shirts and collection of leather shoes. Somewhere that no one would find it, touch or even remember about its existence. And somehow the rifle was loaded and waited patiently on the back seat of his red Volvo. He didn’t remember how it got there but was damn fucking sure that that was where the rifle was now. Did they plan it somehow? Was it planned from the beginning?

Was it?

“You can’t hurt Victoria,” he whispered.

“Who said Victoria?” Josh snapped, turned back and walked away from the tree, still heated after the fight. The very first fight he had ever lost. “I’m talking about Price. You want Rachel, you hate Price’s guts. Two birds, one bullet.” He kept smiling in this weird, dreamy way, bulking his jeans’ pockets with his fists. The night was chilly, but he didn’t seem to be cold, even if wearing only one t-shirt. “Simple. It’s just removing the obstacles, bro. Just like we removed Kris when she got into our business.”

“It was temporary.”

The traffic lights changed to green again, sparkling the surfaces of many dark puddles. The hellish red pavement misshaped into a glowing, emerald track. No one passed through the intersection anyway, but it was allowed if anybody wanted.

“And that was a mistake.” Josh ran fingers through his hair, walking in loops again. Nathan was in the middle of this circle watching his brother changing the rhythm of his steps, losing it, speeding up and then turning back. Somehow, he kept the same pace as the distorted song played inside. “That was the biggest mistake I’ve ever done. We let her run away, and she is back now, prying and snooping around. But…” He rose his palms stopping in place for a second and then continued his weird trot. “What’s done is done, but Price… She’s a walking dead anyway. Who cares? No one would care. No one would cry after her, even Rachel.” Nathan knew it wasn’t true but wanted to listen more, so he moved forward summoned by this lie like a moth to light. “Ding dong, the bitch is dead. You want her dead.” Josh was closer now, still circling, spinning and enclosing. The drums inside hurried up. “You want to see her just like you saw this deer ten years ago. You want her…”

Nathan hated Josh so much right now. Him and himself, for listening and letting his words to infect him again. His brother’s will would prevail anyway, there was no point in trying to stop him, but he couldn’t. Not again. Not like that.

A rapid gust of cold wind shook him to the bone. He was only a fucking leaf on a dead branch that was still resisting the winter dreaming about the subtle heat of summer. It was all in the past though, there was no other option but fall. He had no free will anyway. Josh was his guiding light, knowing what was right for him and for them both. The pulse of the party slowed down and exploded in a faster beat. The traffic lights changed to red again stopping no one.

There was only one way. Only one way.


“It has to be done, Nathan.” Appearing from the right, then from the front, Josh’s voice was calm and gentle, tantalizing. “I’m done with her. You don’t want her around either. The sooner, the better.
Remember the deer? Remember his rotten corpse? We can leave her in the woods, where no one’s gonna find her. Just by the deer.” They both memorized the spot, could walk there with their eyes closed. So many years and they would still find a way back there.

“Eight. Seven. Six.” Nathan blurted out, closing his eyes tightly. Fast, faster before the world would change to green again, and the yellow light was almost there.

His brother gasped in desperation. His steps thumped around him.

“You loved your first blood.” He did. “You loved when its head blew up.” Fucking true. “You dreamed about it every night since then.” Nathan sobbed. “It’s your destiny. It’s your fate! Take what’s yours, Nathan. Stand up for yourself and punish this cunt. Let’s do it. Together. Let’s fucking do it!”

“Five. Four. Three. Two…” Continuing didn’t break him but bent him pretty good. Nathan almost expected an explosion of fury or a simple slap. Fumbling over his words he was so close to cast him away, postpone this plan. Delay, but not to wreck it.

Nathan was too weak to destroy anything.

“Again, huh? Dandy. I know the game. You don’t have to finish. I will be around.” His brother snorted and nodded slowly. He didn’t get angry, didn’t hit him, didn’t even say anything upsetting. Josh knew he won anyway. It was only a matter of time, and Nathan would agree and follow his lead as he had been doing. “Think about it. Think about it, Nathan!” He yelled, walking off, and then he jolted forward and ran towards the school, excited like no fight had taken place.

He didn’t want to miss out on anything. He didn’t want to be left out.

***

Nathan didn’t want to think about anything though. Only three pills were left, but the real emergency emerged. He swallowed them all finding a half-empty beer bottle and watering them down ravenously. Maybe Victoria was right, his brother belonged in a secured hospital ward, with thick metal bars in the windows, wrapped in a white straitjacket and tied up to his bed. Maybe he was the crazy one. Although, Josh was the only person who actually understood and supported him no matter what. Against all odds, he was willing to commit a fucking murder to get Nathan the girl he wanted.


Hide. It was better to hide before Josh would find him again and start planning. No questions would be asked this time, no special convincing. His brother was always winning, and this opportunity was too good to miss. New Year’s Eve was a perfect setting like they planned it already, setting it up in their minds for days, weeks, months. So many explosions, blast after blast, everybody was either stoned, drunk or sleeping already. The chaos was in their favor.

The drama lab was always cozy and usually empty, except the hurried evenings of rehearsals. He snuck in, closed the heavy door, rushed to the dressing room and sat behind the warm collection of capes, dresses, and uniforms. Shaking from the drug that was taking control over him and making his nose bleed, Nathan huddled between the fuzzy and soft fabrics, thinking so hard about the incoming fluffy, blurry cloud. It was around the corner, coming into his velvet crib created from the smell of
sweat and powder, dust and darkness. Almost there.

It took him a second to notice he wasn’t alone. Fucking hell, fucking universe. Not being able to see, still holding onto his own darkness, he wrapped himself up in the red jacket not willing to peer outside.

“No. Why are you even trying, Rachel? You want this part, you are perfect for it. You breathe Shakespeare the way I would never be able to, and you like gender bender roles, I…” He recognized Juliet’s voice. It had to be a dream though. The cloud on his tongue tasted bitter and sweet, cuddling with him in his self-made womb. Juliet couldn’t be there. She was about to drop out and get back to Miami, hiding with her family, just like most of the others had done. Why would she torture herself trying to have fun when she was unable to do so?

He almost giggled, but the tears in his eyes forbade him to do so. Yeah, right. He was doing the same though. Fun. New Year.


“It’s not about the part.” Rachel. It was Rachel’s voice in a low whisper and damn desperate. “Juliet, what the hell? Is it a relationship thing or… boyfriend… or…? You know I’m not asking to drag out any gossip from you. I’m just worried. We’re friends. Look, if you don’t want to be part of the play, it’s fine, but if something is wrong…”

Silence. Dusty, dim silence of the dressing room.

Too scared to look outside of his hideout, Nathan was condemned to whispers and rustles only.

“Something happened to me.” It was hard to catch what Juliet was saying, mumbling and pausing between almost every word. “And I just…”

“What kind of something?” More irritated rustle. Rachel was never great with patience, he remembered. Always edgy like Nathan’s brother, she wanted her answers to be delivered here and now. They would be a lovely couple, he thought. They would fucking match. The golden boy and the most beautiful girl in school. No, she was his, he tried to remember. Josh didn’t have any rights to her. No one had but him. Mine, she is mine, he wanted to cry.

Yours, the cloud agreed. Tap. Tap. The bliss was slowly appearing, but was uneven, broken, potholed. Nathan was trying to catch its full inhale, but the cloud was running away, leaving only a few small gasps to breathe on.

“Something wrong.” Juliet’s answer pierced the silence and in a second made it heavier. “Something that I might not remember.”

No sound, not a single move. It was damn hot in this room, especially for him, but the stillness seemed frozen.

“Something very… personal?”

“You can say that.” Careful murmur. “I guess. I don’t know. I just need time to put myself together and…” Short chuckle. “…Reading some old dead guy’s script is not helping. Nothing is fucking helping.” A sob. Another one. “I really don’t know why I’m still trying with this college thing. I should just drop out, go home, give up. Like… Rach, if you tell anybody…”

A rapid move. Probably a hug. Nathan wanted a hug too, so he rubbed his cheek on one of the fleecy, fuzzy dresses. The fabric clung to his skin like a best friend’s kiss. Tap. Something moved
outside. A step or just an attempt of one.

Tap.

“I won’t. I swear.” Rachel whispered back. Her impatience changed its tone though. Now she was rushing to reassure her friend, not to learn more. She got all she wanted though. She knew. Nathan felt like crying again. Rifle. Deer. No. “Listen. If you’re talking about what I think you’re talking about…”

The cozy hideout became stuffy and airless. He almost felt like choking. The garments, uniforms, and outfits of strangers were gathering around him, surrounding him with their thickness and coziness. A crowd without bodies was circling around, tightening the invisible noose on his neck. He would die here, suffocated by the fake masks and skins of imaginary characters. He would fucking die, just like the deer, and no one would ever find him.

It wasn’t real though. It wasn’t.

A punch. Small stroke. Either somebody hit the table or stroke it by accident. More rustles. A few steps, like somebody wanted to walk off but got stopped or turned around.

“Don’t you fucking judge me, Rachel. You’ve been partying way harder than me. You’ve been doing all the weird shit and worse.” Juliet was close to tears, even if she sounded angry. He was so glad he didn’t have to see her crying. It would be too much and make the rifle more real.

The weapon. One bullet, two birds or even more since they were multiplying, bringing more dark news. Rachel knew, or she would know soon enough. She wasn’t stupid though, even Mark said so. She would find out about everything that Josh did, and what Nathan knew about. And about the dark room.

She had to be stopped. Distracted. Somehow.

If Josh was aware of this conversation, he would have only one solution. A bullet. One trigger pulled and everything becoming so simple. No whispers and confessions in the dressing room, no fights in the hallways covered in glitter, no traffic lights changing so rapidly outside.

They weren’t real anyway. They couldn’t be real.

“I’m not judging you!” Rachel almost yelled but calmed down at once. So sympathetic and understanding. So perfect, even if not really existing. So his. “Let’s talk. Tomorrow. Promise?”

There was no tomorrow, he thought still choking. Rifle. Deer. Josh. No. Maybe?

“Yeah. Promise.”

***

Run. Run. Escape! The taps and clangs melted into one big, fucking howl. Run, just run! Before everything would fall down and collapse. Before Josh would find him and learn what he knew. Before it would be too late. It was already too late though.

He noticed Max Caulfield also walking fast and sobbing. Her tears made him feel bad even if Nathan didn’t have anything to do with her sorrow. Poor girl, she didn’t deserve her girlfriend to treat her
like that. Mark said she was very talented but broken at the same time. Too sensitive, his teacher said; too perceptive to her own misery. They passed each other quickly, both trying to hide in the shadows of the straight, wide corridor.

She had support though, she had her friends and family, her passion and people who wanted to see her smile, even if it didn’t happen often. He was alone. Alone. Alone. And he had to run before the idea of firing a bullet in the direction of Max’s best friend would get to him again.

Then the world turned upside down and slapped him in the back of his head. He got brutally stopped, pushed against the wall, with an elbow locked on his throat. Coughing and wheezing, he tried to sneak out, but the grip was tight. The cloud was brightening his sight so much it took Nathan a good half a minute to finally see their faces.

“Oh, hi, Nattie, Long time, no dope. Do you have some celebrity special for us?” It was Zach, already completely drunk. A guy who should’ve been expelled a long time ago for being a serious, full-blown junkie, but was still able to play the role of a good student. Everybody was pretending to be somebody they weren’t in this fucking town. Zach called him a friend some time ago. Zach, who loved Josh calling him his brother from another mother. Zach, funny jerk who always thanked them so much for dope or a fix delivered on the house. Zach, who was holding Nathan tightly and was ready to do everything he could to get what he wanted. And it wasn’t Prescott’s well-being. Oh, no.

“No, no dope today.” He tried to run away but was held tightly. Almost as close as Price was holding Caufield at the parking lot. No escape, no way out, but grounded in place. The thing was, the intentions of those guys were drastically different. The girls wanted to support each other. Those people wouldn’t mind beating the shit of him. Maybe even kill him, who knew?

Wouldn’t it be a bad thing? The cloud tasted like sweat now. No more stress, tears, cozy dressing rooms, a cold front yard with a beat-up elm tree. No more fake glitter.

They weren’t real, none of them were.

“C’mon, a VIP lounge without a superior treatment?” Logan was there too, so hammered that he was hardly standing. They wouldn’t touch him if they weren’t fucking drunk. They wouldn’t have the guts to do it. A few sips of booze and all his reputation of being untouchable vanished into thin air. “What kind of New Year’s is that? Don’t tell me we will have to party without some neat fireworks.”

“I don’t have anything on me.” He murmured, trying to hide in the collar of the red jacket. The holy talisman didn’t help though. The football boys didn’t give a flying fuck about his brother’s favorite piece of clothing, ready to rip it off if they wanted or just by accident. Nothing was sacred for them.

The clang of the locker sounded like ice thrown into an empty whiskey glass. Somebody prepared themselves a drink, and he was one of the main ingredients.

“Yeah, I see your fucking eyes, Nathan, so it’s fucking hard to believe you. What the fuck, Prescott? Ain’t we your favorite people here? C’mon spill some beans. The crystal ones, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t have anything!” Reasonable excuses never worked, but he had to try. “Bowers left town, I couldn’t…”

They almost threw him on the floor like a pigskin after a training that went bad. He got lost with who was holding him. Zach’s hands were trembling a bit. Logan was just strong but less hectic. They passed him around like a fucking ball. The only jargon they understood was touchdowns, punts, and laterals. No game, he wanted to yell, but they would rip him apart for such an announcement.
“Listen, you freak.” Zach snorted. “We tolerate your existence because you’re the key to our constant fucking happiness. And good humor. Gotcha? You either find a way to give us what we want, or your rich daddy will have to pay for a new set of teeth, you got me?” Logan started to laugh so hard he almost pissed himself. It was a joke for them though, an innocent practice, not even a full game.

“You’re fucking kidding me.” Nathan blinked, not sure if he heard them right.

Josh. Where was Josh when he needed him?

“Oh, we don’t, we don’t, Nattie. Figure something out, alright? We believe in you, all of us. So, will you solve our little problem, huh?” So he nodded because they wanted him to nod. “Good boy.” He got patted on the cheek, just like a little kid. Tap. Tap. Good boy. Good dog. Fetch. Sniff. “And I want it before midnight. It will be damn nice to see those fireworks in all twelve dimensions. Do we have a deal?”

“Yeah.” The only thing Nathan could do was to agree. Why not? They weren’t real. They couldn’t be real. “Yeah, we do.”

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“I told you.” His voice resonated between the tiled floor and the cold, metal walls, drowning in the sinks and toilet bowls. Despite how dirty and wet the floor was, Josh sat by his side and scratched his head vigorously, ruining the perfect hair. With a constant smirk on his face, and half-burnt cig in the corner of his mouth he might as well cosplay James Dean today, and he was adored and worshiped like a movie star anyway. And now the star was by his side again, getting back every time Nathan wished to see him again. His own personal hero. His remarkable, older brother.

Nathan wrapped himself in the red jacket thinking how huge it was. Both brothers were the same height, but he always felt weaker and smaller. This piece of clothing wasn’t bringing him much luck today though as the evening was getting worse with every passing hour. Josh didn’t seem to be upset though, apparently making up the lost time dancing, drinking and flirting like crazy. He didn’t need his jacket to transform into a party animal, unstoppable and undefeated.

“I told you,” Josh repeated.

“How did you find me?” Nathan asked, trying to hide his red, puffy eyes. Yes, he was crying like a little girl in the little ladies’ bathroom, feeling sorry for himself, sitting on the filthy floor and hiding behind one of the metal stalls, between a janitor’s bucket and a cart loaded with frayed brooms and big bottles of detergents. Even if degrading, it was the only safe place Nathan could think of. The classrooms were filled with people, nasty questions and glitter. The boy’s room could be a deadly trap right now, especially if Zach’s crew walked in.

So, this place.

A pile of grapes appeared in Josh’s hand. It was always a mystery how he could get ahold of an infinite source of his favorite treat without much effort. He put one in his mouth and started chewing with a heavenly look on his face.

“I’m your twin brother, for fuck’s sake. I can just read your mind. Nah, joking.” Spit. Seeds on the
floor, chew, repeat. “I’ve seen you sneaking in here and those bastards smiling, so I put two and two together. Fucked up shit, man. Not good. Don’t worry, I know what to do.”

Nathan felt cold. And hot. Then cold again. Josh offered him some grapes, but he refused. The fruits looked weird, like rotten or foul. Unsafe. His brother sighed and forced him to accept the treat. As always, every welcoming gesture was just an order in disguise. The grape tasted weird, bitter and sour. Not sweet at all.

“Yeah?” Nathan swallowed the whole thing, not able to force himself to spit. “You gonna kill them too?”

Joshua rolled his eyes.

“We don’t kill customers, it would be so unprofessional. We have high standards, Nat. We have class. Let me check.” Hustling the rest of the grapes in his mouth, he stood up and started to run through his pockets throwing out everything he found on the floor. Condoms, money, some old tickets, a phone. Tap. Tap. Clang. The mobile blinked in agony with its display shattered to pieces and revealing some of its secrets in the last second of existence. The poster from “The Sound of Music” was Josh’s wallpaper. Nathan had the same one.

“How can you help, if you are not real?”

Josh scoffed, still unable to speak clearly and chewing obstinately. The grape juice was soaking his chin, staining his shirt with dark, purple smudges. Then a crumbled piece of paper landed in Nathan’s palm.

“Here.” His brother sat back, not even making an attempt to collect all his trash from the ground. “I’m so not real that I’m just giving you this. Call this number, they will deliver tonight. High price, but at least no one would chase after you. See? Your ass has been saved. What would you do without old Josh, Nat? Huh?” He patted his shoulder and got back to his fruits.

Nathan dragged his mobile and typed a text message. A few weeks ago, they talked to this dude from Portland who was offering his service in case something went wrong. Both brothers decided it was too pricey to ask for home delivery every time they needed it, but fortunately, Josh kept the number. A quick response blinked on Nathan’s screen within seconds. High price, but a substantial promise with a date and time. Something quick to avoid disaster. A glimpse of hope.

Something.

“Without you?” Nathan smiled weakly and hid his phone. “I would be dead.”

“C’mon now.” Josh rubbed his head like he was used to often doing when they were kids. Only 30 minutes older, he was always the strongest one just like the age difference was years and not half an hour. “See, that’s the difference between Kris and me. I really have your back. I really know how to help you. She’s just all talk, pulling some strings, playing with you and promising a pile of shit.” Seeing his brother getting upset again, he frowned. “Calm down, Nathan. You rule this place. It’s your school. You just have to calm down.” He patted his shoulder and squeezed lightly. “You rule, bro.”

“I don’t really feel like it.”

Suddenly, the door busted open, and somebody walked in. Nathan, scared that it was one of Zach’s team, froze and then curled up again, trying to hide as much as he could. The thought that it would be one of them shouldn’t be terrifying anymore though, but he couldn’t control his own fears. His
brother sniffled and lurked behind the corner, to check who decided to visit this nasty place and then he grinned and winked at Nathan.

“She is a nice girl.” Rachel said, walking to one of the sinks, looking briefly at the mirror and opening her small purse. Searching in it for a moment, she finally found the eyeshadow and started to apply it carefully with her lips half open. Chloe, who had no intention to improve her makeup, as she didn’t wear any, was just walking in circles, agitated and nervous. Rachel could take minutes or hours, depending on the day and damage.

“She is a nice girl who hits on Steph. Oh, c’mon, Rach, don’t you see it?”

“What can you do?” Her private cheerleader shrugged, trying to remove some very unnecessary smudge from her left eye. “Steph’s a big girl, she knows what she’s doing, and you need two to play this game. I know it upsets Max, but frankly, it’s up to her. She can’t rely on you or us for some magic solution. You ain’t a gay relationship fairy.” The operation ended successfully, so Rachel switched to mascara now, killing all the blue hopes that she would be done anytime soon.

“I just don’t want to be the bad, mean witch.” Her pirate said and turned back trying to find something to do. After the fight with Prescott and last talk with Max, she started to hate this party, even if she had so been looking forward to it the whole week. The fact that Rachel looked so damn tempting didn’t help at all. Everybody was fucking staring at her, which was probably her girl’s intention, but Chloe, especially when paired with a few shots of whiskey, didn’t like to share what was hers and was pretty close to tell the whole school to go fuck themselves.

Nathan finally dared to peer outside of his hideout. He recognized the voices but just wanted to make sure. Them again. Again! Rachel was appearing everywhere today, like a sign, a spectacle dedicated just for Nathan. First with Mark, then at the drama lab, and now with Price. Always around, reachable, but so far away. The universe was laughing at his face then.

Josh was mostly focusing on Chloe though, as he was trying to remember the way she moved, walked and shifted her shoulders. They both noticed the blue pirate didn’t dress up today as well, assuming her outfit that almost never changed didn’t come out of style either. According to the gossips, Price liked to wear her dead father’s clothes as a weird tribute. She had to feel out of place though with her wife looking so damn amazing tonight.

The brothers weren’t wrong though. Chloe felt uncomfortable and would love to get back home or somewhere else, like with fewer people or some shit. The party oddly reminded her of old times when Rachel paid more attention to others than her and even if it wasn’t the case anymore, she felt left out. If asked, she would never admit it though, but let this feeling eat her up inside, drowning it with a shot of whiskey from time to time, as it was a proven way of dealing with the situation. Shitty, but it worked.

“I like bad, mean witches, especially the ones that belong to me. Don’t worry. It will get solved one way or another.” Tweaking her eyeliner, Rachel was damn close to commenting on some fight or almost fight she had heard of and her wife got involved in but got distracted by the loud noise of stall doors being opened one by one. “What are you doing?”

“Checking the premises, as my step-douche would say.” Chloe turned around missing the last stall and the corner behind it. “All clear. Now we can talk witches. Or…” She scrutinized her girl one more time, feeling her blood boiling. Damn, this pirate was lucky. “…Cheerleaders.”

A knowing smirk was valid evidence that Rachel was perfectly aware of what her rebel was thinking about. It wasn’t far-fetched to assume she had a similar idea of how to end this evening and even if playing hard to get a bit, she was already hungry for a blue desert. Chloe was adorable when jealous
and horny at the same time, and Rachel wouldn’t mind witnessing it for a bit longer. However, her pirate would get what she wanted since the need was more than mutual.

Patience, she thought still smirking, patience, my dear pirate.

“One doesn’t exclude the other.” Rachel was done with one eye, but unfortunately, nature gifted her with two. Chloe sighed deeply. “I’m hereby grateful that you care so much about my security, although it’s not really needed. Unless you want me to strip for you in this nasty bathroom for your entertainment. If so, I agree. I would prefer us to be entirely alone.” She smiled at her rebel and turned back to the mirror.

Chloe thought about the suggested idea for a moment.

“You wouldn’t do that.” She stated unsurely.

“Is that a dare?” Rachel lurked at her between the tweaks.

Scratching her neck, her blue treasure moved closer.

“I have a better dare in mind...”

“Like?” The mascara was done. Rachel double checked the effect, turning from one side to the other and then satisfied from the improvement, finally closed the tube. Some wicked magic occurred, and she somehow looked way more tempting than ever before. Nathan almost gasped, with his mouth wide open. Jesus Christ, she was so perfect, and Price was just standing there like nothing had changed.

“I dare you to kiss me.” Came the blue dare.

“That’s it?” Rachel frowned, expecting the cheerleader outfit to wake up some more creativity. “You don’t even try to challenge me.”

Her rebel leaned over the main door, rolling her eyes.

“I dare you to drop to your knees and take off my pants. Is that more challenging?” She said a bit annoyed. Inventing dares for Rachel, even if only partly a joke, was getting harder every day and Chloe felt terribly unproductive today. She hated being so useless and helpless not able to do anything with this Max and Steph thing. And Kris. This fight club with Prescott didn’t help either, and she wouldn’t mind a romantic distraction, even if delivered between the sink and the toilets. Alright, no kiss then, fine.

Rachel narrowed her eyes and smirked in a very, very dangerous way. Her high heels tapped on the cold floor as she walked to her and leaned forward, forcing the blue confusion to press her back against the door. Almost four fucking years and this one hazel gaze slowly disappearing under eyelids was always taking Chloe’s breath away. She parted her lips, preparing for a tornado and hoping that she didn’t smell like booze much. The kiss didn’t happen though. Rachel’s breath was burning the blue lips for a second as she stared at Chloe for a painfully long moment.

“Not that much.” She whispered, avoided a hungry attempt for a kiss and dropped to her knees undoing Chloe’s belt with one, sharp move. He private treasure blinked, still not sure what was happening.

“Jesus, Rach.” She gasped.

“Is that convincing enough?” She asked kissing her stomach and going lower. Not needing any help,
she was uncovering Chloe inch by inch, pleasantly surprised by the rapid, choked breath. Her girl wasn’t sure if that was just a tease, or a serious attempt so she didn’t react much at first hesitant about what to do with her hands. Then Rachel got damn serious with her actions, and it was too late to think or be sure about anything.

“I could be more…” The blue fingers stretched rapidly and then gripped in two desperate and tense fists. “Rach… Oh, God.” She got pushed harder against the door noticing that her pants were indeed around her ankles. “Devil.”

“Welcome to hell, baby. Or heaven. Your choice. And…” The security issue grew swiftly in the list of Rachel’s priorities now. “Lock the door.” She ordered gently and held her hips firmer.

The metal handle clicked when Chloe turned the knob with her hand already shaking. Hoping that no one would try to get in, rushing with less passionate need, she started to lose her mind slowly under every touch and stroke. Her girl stopped smiling, getting into the moment, becoming hungry and inexorable, but remembering to dose her magic. Public bathroom or not, Rachel had no intention to hurry. Every single reaction to her move, every shiver and tremble was driving her crazy and wanting more of this blue passion that she knew so well. Doing it in the dirty bathroom was probably not the most romantic thing on earth, although it didn’t matter where they were. Only the blue sigh, slowly becoming a moan, a desperate pant, and a shy whisper – that was all that mattered.

“Watch. Watch them. Look at her.” Joshua hit his arm when Nathan turned around not able to stand this sight. “Look at her now!”

So, Nathan looked, peered carefully and had to bite his hand not to cry out.

Rachel. His Rachel. The girl he loved. He was fucking in love with her, even if it was stupid, pathetic and ridiculous. She was the only one who he ever felt connected to, the only one who mattered. Now, she was on her knees serving, pleasing, selling herself short, like in the worst nightmare, almost begging to be used more. Whore. Slut. The worst thing was she was doing it willingly and fuck, with pleasure, enjoying every second of it and possessively keeping Price in place. The blue fucking trash didn’t even have to ask or force her will. She seemed almost as startled by the turn of the events as Nathan.

Rachel. Was she fucking real now? Was she real in general? How would somebody who was living and breathing, having their own ideas and opinions do such a thing? Now? Here. He really hoped that the universe would switch, just like he was switching. Just a switch, he begged. Just please, God, stop it. Don’t make me watch it.

Deep down inside he knew why Rachel wanted her, not him, but it got overwhelmed by frustration, fear, and his own terrible, humiliating arousal. Something he couldn’t stop and felt guilty being turned on by the view, or the sounds only when he closed his eyes trying not to think. He wanted to become tone deaf now, or just be somewhere else, like being beaten up by Zach and his buddies or laughed at by the whole school. Everything was better than this.

Slut. Whore.

Chloe moaned loudly and pressed the blond head closer.

“She should be mine.” Nathan cried, scratching his own palm hard and leaving the bruised and read fingermarks. “She should do it to me. She should.”

Joshua was staring at them with a blank and indifferent look at his face, just like watching a popular movie. He tilted his head to the side, trying to get a glimpse of more details, but those two, tangled
together, became one hot mess moving in one common rhythm.

“And she will.” He whispered back when Chloe’s hand slipped and almost lost her balance, entirely overwhelmed by the act. Rachel peered at her, smiled and pressed her girl as her hand wandered up below her pirate’s shirt. She murmured something and started to work faster and apparently more efficient since her girl had to eat up a scream.

Joshua smirked. He knew this job was almost done. Surprisingly, he didn’t ask Nathan to film it just to show his buddies or publish somewhere online like he had used to. Starting to eat his grapes again, he was just enjoying the show with mild interest, chewing and smiling from time to time.

Nathan couldn’t stand it, not anymore. Shaking and scratching himself he started to trot back and forth, tensed, anxious and frustrated. Seeing them now, within reach, felt strange. Unrealistic. Not real. Although whatever Chloe Price was feeling right now, the way she reacted, arching against the touch, was damn fucking real. For her. Not for Nathan. And Rachel… She not only loved the moment but seemed damn skilled. It was fucking practiced as his girl, his fucking woman, knew exactly what to do to…


They weren’t real. It couldn’t be real. No one would just have fucking sex in the bathroom not checking every single corner. Not like that. No.

Joshua gave him a very long, curious look. For a second, he wanted to say something, reassure him somehow, but Nathan was slowly falling apart, drifting away in his own madness. The older brother shook his head, took one more look at the girls and threw out the rest of the fruits. The grapes rolled over the floor at the same moment when Chloe shut her eyes tightly, stifling a howl. Rachel’s nails scratched her stomach a bit, but she didn’t stop. Don’t stop, Chloe thought. Please stop, Nathan whispered in mind.

“Alright,” Joshua said. “Enough.”

The fire alarm howled loudly a second after he hit it with his bare hand, not worrying about the broken glass. The same exact moment Chloe bent in half scratching the metal side of the sink so hard she almost broke her nail. It felt like dying, but in a good, amazing, overwhelming way.

She noticed the low, loud and dull beeping sound a few seconds after.

“The fuck?” Chloe cleared her throat. “The worst possible timing.”

Rachel got up with a wild grin on her face, adjusted her skirt and helped her girl to lift and zip up the pants. In fact, Chloe’s hands were still shaking as always when they followed their passion in places more or less public, so she was unable to adjust the clothes herself. The help was very much appreciated. A support to stand straight was required.

Beep. Beep.

“I would say the perfect timing.” Rachel purred to her ear, apparently very pleased with herself and with the final effect. One more high school fantasy fulfilled, her bucket list was getting shorter. “I would be very disappointed if it came off a little bit sooner. You’d be too. C’mon, we have to go.” She murmured after a quick peck on the lips. “There’s a fire alarm going on.”

“ Noticed.” Breathing heavily, the blue pirate shook her head. “I can’t walk.” She stated still holding onto the sink in panic, too scared to make a single step. Sitting down on the wet floor wouldn’t be a
choice to consider ten minutes ago, but now it seemed amazingly appealing.

“Oh, now you’re spoiling me.”

“I really can’t fucking walk. I’m done.” Hearing Rachel’s laugh made Chloe smile, even though it required some serious strength. None of her muscles wanted to listen, lips included. “What have you done to me?”

Her girl peered at her and bit her lip. Perfectly aware of how her pirate reacted to those wild Blackwell parties, especially with the Vortex Club present, she was damn glad this little challenge turned up the way it did. It was better to forget about the crowd outside for a second or two than just seeing her girl drink herself to death. The latter was making Rachel worry too much.

“I delivered some fireworks, I believe, including some wizardry and personal cheerleading. Be careful what you dare me to do,” she said. “Try not to look like you just got laid, alright?” The first intention was to push her, create even less of the stability, but Rachel’s hand touched the blue hair instead, and then softly moved down caressing the lips. Her girl always looked so incredibly sensitive after, stripped from all mental armor. Her Chloe. Her baby. Her adorable little shy treasure that was looking at her in awe still shaken and begging for a hug.

It got delivered, and Rachel noticed she couldn’t let her go. It was a pure addiction though. The worst kind of dependence to the blue warmth, smell and the sound of her breath, dirty bathroom or not.

Beep. Beep, howled the fire alarm.

“Easier said than done,” Chloe muttered finally finding enough strength to take a few steps. Her confidence got back along with the need for a passionate payback. Seeing Rachel turning the lock off, she pressed her to the door in the last second and kissed hard. Then again and one more time until she got rewarded by one quiet moan. “I’ll show you more fireworks later.” The beeping sound was earsplitting, but the blue pirate was already deaf. She crashed her lips more in a more possessive and aggressive way, entirely forgetting about her problems with standing straight a second ago.

It was taking them forever. Beep. Beep. Beep. It wasn’t Chloe’s fault that Rachel was melting under every kiss. Beep. She couldn’t be blamed for taking advantage of the short skirt and the leg wrapped around her waist. Beep. Nathan stopped breathing. Beep. They were so close to doing it again, this time the other way around. Beeeep.

“In what sense?” Rachel finally got enough self-control to push her girl back a little and between gasps and soft moans tease her a bit. Not that it was needed, they both were up for another round or actually for more than ten, but she loved to flirt and provoke. She was born to do so.

Chloe responded with a light bite to her shoulder.

“In every sense.” She licked her lips but avoided a kiss. Beep. “You want me dirty?” Rachel hissed in disappointment. Beep. Chloe’s hand found the way under her skirt. Beep. Moan. “You got it. Don’t kiss my neck or I’m not responsible for what happens next.” She warned Rachel at the last moment, and it somehow worked. “Be careful what you dare me to do because you will get plenty.”

“I count on it.” A finger touched Chloe’s lips stopping another blue storm. One more and they would never leave this place. “Later.”

Joshua didn’t move an inch since the alarm went off, still leaning over the tiled wall with his head low. The annoying, loud beeping was deafening, but he remained immune or didn’t hear it at all. If the sluts didn’t care, why would he? With his arms crossed around his chest, he remained motionless, just like another decoration of this old, filthy bathroom. Another stainless steel stall.

Nathan, still trembling, waited for his brother to decide what to do, or to say something at least. Something that wouldn’t crush him entirely though. Something not hurtful. Hopefully.


“So… If you had any doubts on whether we should give Price a solid…” Josh lifted his head. “I hope you changed your mind.”

“Yeah.” Nathan nodded rapidly. “Yes.” He would agree to literally anything just to stop those noises, those voices and visions. Anything. And then seeing his brother still doubting, Nathan added: “Yeah, let’s fucking do it.”

***

The main hallway looked like a whirlpool, a wild tornado of people hurried to the main gate, forgetting about the emergency exists, green arrows or other alternative options. There was the only way out, through the main hallway and all of them wanted to follow the crowd blindly, pushing, screaming, cursing and kicking. At first, no student believed the emergency was real, but the alarm didn’t get turned off, and somebody mentioned that some of the fireworks blew up in the basement. The gossip got repeated and snowballed quickly, so now the whole school was running for their lives, trampling, treading down and almost ripping each other apart. They already imagined flames and dense, thick smoke. It didn’t have to happen for real for them to be scared for their lives.

Nathan wished that there was a real fire though. A fucking blaze that would eat them up, burn them to death, him included. Just one fucking big bang, one festive fake-human BBQ. Wondering if it would smell like burned tires, he tried to sneak out close to the walls. Fire. Flames. Burning this whole thing down. Because why not, nothing mattered anyway, and he wouldn’t have to think about the rifle in the car and his brother rushing him to get it.

Use it.

Beep.

“Calm, please, stay calm!” Principal Wells was trying to control the freaked-out mob. With his hands up he looked like an old, sedate preacher convincing his believers to have faith in salvation. “Slowly leave the building and gather outside. Please. Please! I can see you, Mr. Graham. Yes, yes, miss Chase, I will talk to you in a minute. Listen! Everybody…”

“What are you accusing me of? Open your eyes, Max! Max!” Nathan noticed Price running after her friend yelling and cursing. Caufield was visibly crying, not even trying to hide her tears anymore. He felt for her, really. Invisible, transparent even, but he felt for her. Too bad that her best friend was a useless, fucking whore. Somebody who wasted their previous time in a bathroom in a degenerate, nasty act.
The crowd was moving on, like a collection of pictures in front of his eyes. Blink, a new frame, new action. Another blink, a different set of characters.

“Shake this money maker, baby!” Zach got pushed on Rachel. His hand landed on her ass, by accident of course or that would be his excuse. A slut or not, she reacted quickly, and he hissed in pain when his arms got scratched.

Kris was just behind her, trying to be as close as she could to Steph. Nathan couldn’t see if they were holding hands but was certain of it. Blink. They almost kissed, or the mass of people brought them so close. She said something to Gingrich, but she shook her head not able to hear anything.

“Lighthouse would be a perfect spot. We could see some fireworks from the Bay.” He heard her screaming.

“Yeah, good choice. I don’t want to be accused of any shit.” Steph nodded and yelled through the whole hallway: “Max, are you coming? The lighthouse! The safe spot!”

“Nathan, behave. I see you.” Wells pointed at him like he was the one causing all the trouble. Nathan was the only reasonable one here though, standing still and waiting for those animals to get the fuck out. Sure, he stood out, as always and it got attention. Maybe it was the red jacket, he thought.

His brother appeared by his side out of nowhere.

“They said something about the lighthouse,” Nathan said, against his own will. He should shut up and keep this information to himself, not fueling this crazy plan. On the other hand, after what he just saw, why the hell not? Why not hunt a bit? The world was already burning.

“Yeah, our dear big sis was damn right in that matter. The lighthouse would be a perfect spot indeed. C’mon, little bro.” Josh nodded and pulled him to the door. “It’s time to blow shit up.”

***

Silence. Peaceful, frozen stillness of the forest. A cacophony of contradiction, after all that festival of sounds, clangs, drums, and taps. Just a quiet rustling noise of their steps between the dead leaves and a crack of a dry branch from time to time when one of them stomped on one. Every time it happened Nathan’s heart started racing like their prey could hear them and run away just before the shot. Like it was a real hunt.

“Watch your step.” Josh held his arm, helping to find the safe way. The path was slippery, still a little icy. The rain didn’t wash out everything so deep in the woods. Nathan gulped and nodded, still trying to get a good grip on the rifle. It was so heavy and uncomfortable to carry. Necessary and such
a fucking burden. “No, don’t worry. I loaded it for you.” His brother took it and lifted so easily. “See? A decent weapon, this one. The old man really didn’t cheap out.”

They didn’t say a word in the next ten minutes, climbing, slipping, panting and helping each other out. Not risking taking the main trail, they had to rely on a wild path, avoiding the sharp thorns and naked, angry branches that wanted to stop them every ten inches. The red jacked got torn in a few places, but Joshua didn’t scold him for being so clumsy. They were on a mission though. Those were acceptable loses.

“I think I see them,” Nathan said quietly when they almost reached the cliff. Indeed, the rusty truck was standing there parked on the way to the lighthouse, twenty feet away from the white van, patiently waiting for the party to be over. Those they had come for weren’t around though. Some dark figures made by shadows were flickering by the white lighthouse, glittering in its focus, too busy to watch the time or notice what was waiting in the woods. None of them believed in werewolves or bigfoots anymore, accustomed to Oregon’s dark forests and calling it home. They felt sheltered here. The lighthouse was the safe spot.

We are the boogeymen now, Nathan thought. We are the monsters with sharp fangs and shrill claws. The ultimate danger. We are the nightmare that shouldn’t be real, that you don’t believe exists and can get you at any moment. Surprise, motherfuckers. We are here.

“Good. Let’s lie down. Here.” Helping to find him the right spot Joshua sat by his side checking the weapon one more time. It clicked. He tapped it. Ready. They were ready. He passed the gun to Nathan and smiled gently. “They’re coming.” He said and was right, as always. Two shadows withdrew themselves from the dancing darkness and were heading their direction. “Think about the deer, Nat. It’s coming closer, just in front of the barrel.” Josh’s voice was so nice and soft, soothing. Like a lullaby. Nathan closed one of his eyes to aim better. “You’re almost there. Almost.” And then Josh almost howled. “Fuck.”

The person who was coming towards them wasn’t alone. She was chased by another one, who was speaking loudly and waving their hands in agitation. Apparently, it was a season for fighting and loud arguments, not really party time. Their angry voices echoed sharply among the cliffs, and strangely enough, Nathan could hear every word clearly. Josh was right again.

The cliff was a great place to hunt.

“I swear, Rach. I’m not like low-key guzzling on booze when you’re not looking. Not to fucking mention, you would notice. You are with me the whole time, night and day.” Chloe finally reached her girl, turning her back to her. The argument started a few minutes ago when Rachel learned a bit more about the struggle with Prescott. Not really paying attention how much time they had till midnight, she started to ask very unfortunate and not really needed questions. Victoria Chase attacked by the main asshole wasn’t a rational reason to get into a fight that could get her wife arrested. That was argument number one and was easily rejected by the fact that no one else stood up for the fashion snake. The second one was more hurtful though since Rachel wanted to know how Chloe’s sense of justice was influenced by the bottle of whiskey she just found. The answer wasn’t that honest, and the blue pirate was accused of drinking way too much and too often. Bullshit. So much bullshit. “We sleep in the same bed, go to the same school… I would never… Risk what we have, what you mean to me, what this whole thing means to me for a shot of vodka. You really think I would trade it for something like that?” The blue trouble blurted out, already feeling hella guilty.

“No, but I know that sometimes it’s not what you really want but what this dark fucking thing in your head wants. I’ve been there. I’m still there. I just got worried, baby.” Rachel sighed deeply. “That’s it. I’m sorry...”
Cold. Nathan was so cold hearing them talking like that, like they cared. Price was just a fucking master manipulator though, she brainwashed Rachel, promising her whatever the fuck just to get in her pants. It was just fucking between them, some animal attraction, but now hearing them again, how tender they were to each other, how much they cared about their well-being was freezing him inside.

Not real, right?

“For what?” The leather jacket landed on Rachel’s shoulders. Chloe sniffled and smiled shyly letting her know that they could argue till the end of the world, but that her cheerleader would never get cold on the steep cliff in the middle of the night, especially during winter. Then the blue eyes got a bit bigger, and the pirate felt a cold shiver running through her spine. “Wait, what do you mean you are still there?”

“I mean…” Rachel wrapped herself in the leather coat but was reluctant to look at her girl. Talking about those things didn’t come easily. She didn’t even want to play this card every time they were discussing Chloe’s vice. It just got slipped in by accident as part of being damn honest all the time. Her addiction seemed unreal, like a buried piece of trash that she got rid of and forgot about, although sometimes it got painfully real again. Sometimes. Like now. “That it’s better for me to avoid any kind of temptation regarding you-know-what. Sometimes I think it wouldn’t be that bad just to relax a bit like back in the day, just sniff some shit and forget about all this trouble and stress…”

Chloe got deadly silent for a second.

“Rach…”

“See?” Her cheerleader winced. “Now you’re flipping. I’m a good girl though. Very good girl.” Except for the moments when she got provoked in public bathrooms, but it wasn’t the right time to crack a joke. “It’s not like a real struggle, but one step in the wrong direction and this shit can come back. I promised you, and I promised myself that I would never ever do it again. Ever. I keep my distance, know my limits, but this thing is still there. It will be there forever. And I’m just scared it’s in you too and you wouldn’t pay enough attention. That you can slip in front of me and I wouldn’t notice, just like you hadn’t seen anything for weeks or months even if we slept in the same bed pretty often and saw each other every day after school.”

“I knew something was wrong, Rach.” Her blue, oblivious treasure stated. Still blaming herself, Chloe had one explanation for what had happened to her angel. “I didn’t notice because I was an asshole.”

“You didn’t notice because I didn’t want you to. You…” They became one shadow while cuddling and protecting each other from the cold, ocean wind. “I can’t lose you, Chloe.”

Oh, you will, Nathan thought. You fucking will, and I will make sure of it. You are not real anyway, it doesn’t matter. It’s just a parade of shadows, colors, sounds, and light. A cloud that went wrong and had to be chased away. Although even if those words sounded true in his head, he couldn’t fully believe himself. There was something in the way they looked at each other, how Rachel touched Price’s hand, how her voice changed every time she spoke to her. Something different, something he had never experienced.

They seemed more vibrant, more constructed, more solid than him. More real.

“You won’t, sunshine. You won’t. You were right though. I got a bit over the top tonight. You take care of me, and I will take of you, alright?” Chloe cupped Rachel’s face with both hands forcing her
to look into the eyes of the pirate. Very loving eyes. Damn freaking charming. “No weird shit. I’m careful. For you. For us. For myself. I know my limits very well. I tested them back and forth. I love you so much, sunshine. So much, that I…” Her voice broke not because the blue rebel felt ashamed to talk about her feelings but got hit with the dark recalls of all those months that she didn’t want to feel at all. One year ago, she was crying, celebrating the new year with two empty bottles and hoping for Rachel to get back to her and calling her all the names in the book at the same time. Last year, Chloe Price had no control over herself and her future, confident that she was just one big failure. Twelve months ago, the blue pirate was scared to death that her girlfriend would lose her way in the dark, make a deadly mistake and disappear into the thin air without a trace and she would never hear from her again. One year. Long, long time ago.

Rachel was here though, alive and well.

“I know. I know… Baby…” She kept whispering, cuddling her blue treasure close. “I’m here.”

They didn’t say much for a long while, enjoying the cold of the night and listening to the muffled yells from far away. A few first fireworks appeared on the sky but vanished quickly ashamed of a false start. They could stand there forever, just feeling each other close and sharing one, not very comfy jacket.

They had no idea that a dark, steel barrel was aimed in their direction.

“I’m glad you told me though,” Chloe said stepping away from the hug and wondering how Rachel survived in her outfit without freezing to death. Surrendering her coat, the blue pirate could feel her bones turning to ice. “I mean about the stuff that’s still there. In you. It’s good to know so… This thing won’t be smoked tonight.” A big, fat blunt appeared in her fingers. Yeah, she had this shitty plan to add some green spice to the celebration, but not a good idea. “Hey…” The joint got snatched from her hand, and Rachel urged her with a gesture to pass her the lighter. “You sure?”

The blue earring twirled when she nodded calmly.

“I know my limits, Chloe. Mine and yours. And I’m not gonna do it again anytime soon. It’s my farewell to good, old weed the same way you just had a toast with your bottle of booze.”

They didn’t smoke anything for almost a year now, not together at least. Not that Rachel really missed it but wouldn’t mind trying it one more time in a safe zone with her blue rebel, who had been used to breathing weed more often than air. This time had passed through, was nothing more but one dreamy memory and she really wanted to experience it again. Just like taking a look at an old, forgotten photograph before it got weathered down and all the faces become unrecognizable.

Still hesitant, Chloe was almost sure that that was the worst idea ever. After the whole conversation of the hidden monster of addiction still showing its ugly head and grinning its teeth, her only wish was to throw this thing away and never touch similar shit again. This was good stuff though, brought just from Seattle, tested and without any surprises. Some decent herb to relax.

“Uh, alright. Just this one time, right?” She covered the flame with her palm, lighting the joint up. “Fuck, it’s windy.” Despite the weather, it got fired on the second try. “Tasty, huh? I picked it with care.” Watching her girl smoking something else than Marlboro made Chloe feel odd, out of place. Almost like she was this dirty secret again, a girl that was delivering pleasure and attention, but never got it back fully. It wasn’t true though. Rachel was hers. Hers. Fucking married. That made Chloe smile. “Is there anything else I should’ve known about?” She asked, trying to crack a joke and just stop thinking about this silly, dark shit.

Rachel took one more drag, leaning over the truck and thought for a moment.
“Well… I kissed Megan when I was 14.” She confessed.

“Who?”

“Megan, my cheerleader friend. Those school lockers in California can be very charming, especially late at night after very exhausting rehearsals.” Rachel narrowed her eyes having a bit too much fun with the first signs of blue jealously. “It was just one kiss, and she pretended she didn’t know me afterward. What can I say, I’ve always been a sucker for tall girls with blue eyes.” The fact that Chloe was balancing between getting green-eyed and melting under a hidden complement was damn adorable. Rachel took a deep drag of thick smoke and passed the lit-up joint to the rightful owner. Her pirate didn’t refuse, inhaling greedily.

“Always trying to score a cheerleader?” Chloe asked with a cheerful flash in her eyes.

“At least one of us succeeded…”

“This should be easy,” Josh whispered to his ear, but Nathan wasn’t so sure. He was cold and scared, so scared. Were werewolves afraid of the dark as well? Did monsters look after their shoulders while hunting down their victims? The trigger was just there, but still far away. “It will be easy.” His brother promised.

The weed kicked off quite fast. The girls both started to giggle, still smoking and feeding each other on their cloudy breaths, fooling around a bit. Nathan’s hands went so cold that he barely could feel his fingers. Then Price moved closer, pushed Rachel against the car and started whispering something in her ear. Something very intense though, since her wife’s cheeks turned red, she bit her lip and held her breath for a second.

“Surprised?” The blue pirate asked when done.

It was hard for Rachel to put herself together after what she just heard. Her pirate rarely became so vocal with her promises, preferring to show than say, but it wasn’t unwanted. One of the delightful secrets that got forgotten in the meantime and even if they both could live without such magic it was nice to listen to it again.

“I didn’t expect that, but I’m more than than willing to follow your lead tonight if that’s what you’re asking. You didn’t joke about this dirty thing.” Her lips got crashed in a rapid kiss. Then another. “Baby… Chloe… I don’t mean right now. You can tear it up later if you want, seriously, but… Oh, fuck.” Moaning was so easy when high. “You’re going too far…”

Her reaction only encouraged Chloe. The shy and uncertain treasure got replaced by a brave and very persistent pirate who wanted one thing only. To celebrate in the best way possible.

“Seems you forgot how this thing works on… us.” Chloe murmured against Rachel’s neck. “Plus, you dared me to…”

Clang.

The rifle clicked. It sounded so loud that Nathan got afraid that they could hear it. Panicking, he froze in place. Why would they do this to him if they knew? What would they say? What would his mom say, he thought. His mom. His sister. Fucking Kris.

When he was a kid, he was told he could become anyone he wanted. He got promised the family fortune and the support in any plans he could create for himself. An open road but secured with tons of love and guarantees. Not much got left of it, but he kept wondering what they would say now that he was lying on the frozen ground between the grey and brown leaves with a brand-new rifle.
squeezing his cheek painfully.

“What are you waiting for?” Josh urged, punching him in the arm. “C’mon!”

“This truck is filled with explosives.” A reasonable explanation never worked, but he had to try. Nathan always tried and always failed. “I don’t want to hurt Rachel…”

His brother looked at the old rusty, then the girls, then the starry sky above them and shrugged. He couldn’t care less about this cheerleading whore. They were on a mission. They had to succeed against all odds and obstacles, even the smoking hot ones.

“Fucking hell with this whore. You’ve seen what she’s done today, right? And you still want to protect this cunt?” Josh spat on the ground, shaking his head. “Jesus Christ, you’re such a pathetic, little fuck.”

Nathan put the rifle on the side carefully and then punched him. Not hard though, just enough to surprise Josh. They agreed on punishing Price, but putting Rachel in danger was an entirely new thing. His brother could order him around as much as he wanted but this girl, this one human being, real or fucking not, was untouchable, despite what she had done today.


> “Or what?” Josh smiled widely and punched him back. The bushes swooshed loudly. “Good. Get angry. Fucking furious. I want you to be fucking mad. Look at them!” He pointed at Rachel who just stood up on her tip-toes to kiss her girl on the forehead. “They’re doing it to piss you off, to show that you are nothing more than a fucking lunatic, no one important, somebody who doesn’t matter and won’t matter. Never. Ever. Unless…” The rifle landed in Nathan’s hands again. “You’re just one pull away from getting it. One trigger. One bullet. One small step.”

Suddenly the girls straightened up, and one of their many kisses got broken. As they parted a slender figure appeared in the lighthouse’s walking beam approaching them slowly. Step by step this person was getting more shapes and colors as her face became identifiable. Nathan almost dropped the gun. Fuck. Was it a blessing or another distraction?

“Hey girls, isn’t it too soon for a midnight kiss?” Said Kris, appearing by their side and not really bothered by the fact that they were in the middle of something quite intimate.

“It’s never too soon,” Chloe responded, already damn high and still holding Rachel’s thigh in a possessive but nonchalant way. The idea of privacy vanished in a sweet cloud of influence, however, the pirate wasn’t sure if she should blame the weed or her girl. Probably both. “How about you?” She asked bluntly.

Nathan’s sister was watching them for a moment, contemplating her response. So many passages of confessions, big speeches, and small statements were waiting to be said, but she couldn’t force herself to just pick one. It was essential to respond though, to answer as honestly as she could, otherwise the future would become one convoluted mess of complications. Kris really wanted that future, striving for it with every fiber of her being although it didn’t mean she would get a chance.

“I don’t know. Maybe too soon in general.” She admitted. “Or too late.”

“So that’s true, huh?” Releasing Rachel’s leg and letting her stand more or less straight, the blue pirate scoffed. “You and Steph?”
Nathan grasped on the rifle.

This night gave Kris a lot of high hopes, but nothing had been decided yet. However, it felt like a stupid excuse to lie to them, brushing it off and claiming that Steph was just a memory, an old friend she got reunited with by accident. The spark between them was already too strong to resist, and even if her ex wanted to play hard to get, they all knew where it was going. Still, nothing was promised. Nothing happened. Yet.

“Do you mind?” She asked simply.

Chloe looked at Rachel hoping for help, but her wife decided to delight herself with one more puff, not keen on taking the lead in this discussion. If matters went south, she would tear Kris apart in a second, but now was damn pleased with listening, not talking. The weed was making her lazy though, and her responses could be too sharp or poorly aimed.

“Listen, dude.” The blue pirate sniffled taking a few steps toward Kris. “I don’t know you. I don’t have anything against you. You’re kinda cool and stuff. I really wish you all the best, but…”

“You worry about your friend. I got it.” Nathan’s sister cut her off calmly. “I respect it. I would worry too. Trust me, it’s not my intention to create any drama…”

“Might be too late for that.” Rachel’s voice broke in. “Or too soon.” She pointed out somewhere in the darkness, between the cliff and the other car. The blue pirate squinted her eyes trying to see what her girl meant and when finally noticing a small, running shadow, she swore loudly and passed the joint to Rachel.

“I’m gonna check on her.” She mumbled fast and ran after the tiny, broken figure who was climbing on the path to the lighthouse. Whatever Max just experienced, it had to crush her. Chloe hoped that her friend didn’t decide to hold an extremely important conversation with Steph just minutes before midnight but knew from experience that those things just occurred by themselves, not really waiting for the right time.

“And it’s too late.” Josh ran his fingers through his hair. Extremely frustrated, he didn’t even start scolding his brother. Price was vanishing and appearing in the last expected moments, sneaking out better than a fucking snake. “Fuck!”

Nathan’s back started to hurt. He felt stiff and rigid, almost frozen between the bushes and the weapon in his shaking hand. Looking at Josh, he smiled sadly and lowered his head. So here they were again. Nathan had always felt divided in two, deprived from any boundaries or structures. Just like an underdog that followed his older brother, just to see him doing things that no one should do. Damaged goods, not worth the attention or even a pleasant look. Now he was slowly cracking under pressure, preparing to do something he never really wanted. Josh forced him to strive for it though. Josh didn’t care if it hurt him. Josh…

“I couldn’t.” He explained hoping Price wouldn’t turn around. “My hands are shaking.”

Between one drag of smoke and another, Kris and Rachel stared at each other. Nathan’s sister knew that only an honest chit-chat with this girl in a cheerleading outfit was the way to solve some of the issues but wasn’t keen on starting this discussion. Feeling too old for all this high school crap, she just enjoyed looking at Chloe’s wife and had to admit that her brother had exquisite taste in women. Almost as good as her.

Rachel on the other hand, waited on purpose, learning more about Kris with her every move and nervous surveying. Her intentions were clear even if unspoken and it would be wise to discuss a
thing or two when Chloe wasn’t around. Her blue pirate was very protective of Max and Rachel noticed that she didn’t want the little freckle to be hurt as well. That surprised her, so she just shifted a bit, but not losing her assertive and confident pose.

“I probably should say something like that if you hurt one of them, I will hunt you down and kill you, but I know it’s not necessary.” She said finally breaking the silence. “You won’t. Saves me the hassle.”

“You don’t know me,” Kris responded at once, grateful that they finally began. “Yet.”

His sister talking to Rachel. Kris casually starting a conversation with the girl of his dreams. She already achieved more than he had been able to in one fucking week! Caufield was right. Spot on, for fuck’s sake! Seven days and they started to connect in such an average, natural way. Nathan felt useless again, even with a rifle pointed at them all the fucking time. Not worthy.

“That’s my line.” Tapping the ash out, Rachel noticed how much she missed this sluggish and courageous bliss. “You wouldn’t risk another long-term trip to Brazil just for kicks and fucking Max over, but my wife might have a little bit of a different perspective.” The term wife had a different flavor when she said it while high. Rachel had never tasted it before. Sweet, a bit sour, like a birthday cake with some white icing. Tasty. She licked her lips. “Don’t get me wrong. I quite adore what you’re doing. You came back for her. You risked everything again for her. I would do exactly the same thing if I wanted my girl back. I kind of did.” Feeling for Max was one thing, but she couldn’t do anything in that case. Stating it felt like a betrayal though, plotting behind Chloe’s back. It wasn’t Rachel’s fault though as she understood all of their motives.

Kris nodded slowly.

“Seems like you always get what you want.” She switched the topic a bit, knowing that sidetracking could be way more beneficial than explaining herself directly.

Rachel looked at her cheerleader outfit and smiled.

“Don’t judge the book by its cover, especially today, but I’m hella effective, yeah.”

“Hella?” Nathan’s sister smirked. “California breed, I see. Bay area?”

“South. La La land, where the cheerleaders go to die.” Even high, Rachel knew how to get back to the topic. Yes, sidetracking was nice, but she was too accustomed to this trick to fall for it. “Anyway, I’m not judging you, but be careful. Not for your sake but Steph’s, and you don’t want to be stuck in the middle. Max is a dear friend, very… very fragile and sensitive.” Calling the little freckle her friend also tasted strange. Rachel was damn sure she had never done it before. What a night. “She’s been in a pretty dark place lately, not only because of Steph, although… She doesn’t take rejection lightly.”

“No one does.” She heard a quiet response followed by an extensive dose of silence. “If they were in perfect terms and still together, I wouldn’t be here.”

Chloe’s jacket almost fell from her shoulders when she shrugged. This hide-and-seek game was playing on Rachel’s nerves, but thankfully she medicated herself enough to avoid a blunt confrontation. Kris seemed decent though, unfortunately, was interested in somebody who was involved with her friend, and so on… the oldest story in a small lesbian club. Arcadia Bay was way too small, Rachel decided.

“If they were, you wouldn’t. Steph wants you here though, and that’s all it matters after all, doesn’t
“It?” She finished with a knowing smirk.

“Yeah.” Kris loved to pause before every sentence. How Steph was able to stand it was beyond Rachel but didn’t comment on it still waiting. And then Prescott’s daughter switched again. “I can see why my brother can’t get you out of his head.”

A thick smoke appeared between them, hiding the golden, black and red stripes of Rachel’s outfit. She should be so thankful for Chloe’s jacket though, and her thoughts wandered to her girl immediately. Hoping her pirate wasn’t freezing much, she wrapped herself more in the leather. It smelled like home.

“Am I still there?” She almost coughed inhaling another cloud. It was a bad idea to finish this joint without Chloe, but Rachel couldn’t resist. Not tonight. “He is fucking delusional.”

Apparently, discussing her brother’s situation was part of Kris’s plan. Finding the gloves in her pocket, she put them on and started to rub her hands warming them up, preparing for the lengthy discussion. Rachel didn’t mind sharing what she thought about the young Prescott. Some pity, some irritation, and a lot of hope that he would leave her the fuck alone. Not a big secret.

“He might be, and believe me or not, I’m trying to help him,” Kris stated firmly. “I might’ve come back to see Steph, but I want to take care of him too. Somebody has to.”

It would take a lot to actually help him, Rachel thought but didn’t want to get into another useless fight about somebody she wasn’t concerned about. Nathan wasn’t her problem and never would be.

“Mark Jefferson is currently holding this position.” She said hoping to end this topic.

To be honest, Rachel had never asked Mark about Nathan, only knowing they worked on some photography project together. Not really interested that much in the technicalities she never dug into it, afraid to start a conversation that she wouldn’t have a single advantage with. Her knowledge about taking photos was limited to how good she looked on them, and that was more or less it. Max could maybe give her some insight, but since Chloe’s best friend wasn’t a big fan of Jefferson, to put it mildly, perhaps it wasn’t the best idea in general.

Well, she should ask about Nathan somehow causally, expressing just a modern, tiny interest. Snoop around for the sake of being well-informed of course. Those two guys spent an awful lot of time together, and if she didn’t know Mark any better, Rachel would assume that there was something more between them than a camera. Those gossips appeared once in a while but ridiculous from the get-go and died every semester, before reaching the principal’s office.

“Apparently, he’s not doing his best or not enough, but thank you for the tip.” Kris heard enough about Mark Jefferson to already categorize him as a poser that liked to show off and lived off the praises delivered by most of the female Blackwell population. Jerk. Not the therapist she had in mind when it came to her brother. “I’ll get a word or two in with his favorite teacher. Nathan is not a bad person, he just needs to get his shit together, open his eyes and set his priorities straight. He has a nice, brighter, softer side too.”

Nathan looked at Josh. His brother just rolled his eyes making himself more comfortable between the bushes and branches. Kris became very chatty lately, and her discussion with Rachel could take hours. The midnight blast was their only hope.

“From the bottom of my heart, I wish you all the best.” Rachel shrugged. She didn’t give a flying fuck about Nathan. “However, he might have a fucking rainbow hidden underneath as far as I’m concerned, but I’m not interested in exploring his bright side or any side for that matter.” Then her
eyes flashed. “Listen, if you’re trying to hook me up with your brother, I don’t know who is more delusional. I belong to that one, there.” She pointed at the lighthouse, assuming that her wife joined the dancing crowd, hopefully with Max around. That or Rachel would spend the rest of this night trying to find them in the National Park. “End of story.”

Kris shook her head.

“Oh, I’m not even gonna suggest such a thing. I’m not blind, Rachel. I know he’s fucked up and couldn’t hold a candle to Chloe. Hopefully he will understand it soon enough though. You are just a dream for him, Rach.” Only Chloe was allowed to call her that, and even if Kris didn’t know this unwritten rule, it was fucking infuriating. Rachel didn’t say a word but promised herself to react very strongly if Nathan’s sister would dare to say it again. To err was human, but she would prefer her to be human in that matter once. “An amazing, beautiful dream he will never make true and has to wake up from, although… He doesn’t take rejection lightly.”

Nathan wanted to howl. Bark. Cry. Betrayed, just like Josh said. Fucking deceived again. Lied to. His brother giggled, delighted at how right he had been. So not fair. Not fair. Not fair. This whole game was so rigged. And Nathan felt so alone hearing this giggle. Kris made a promise a few hours ago and couldn’t keep her word for one day, one evening.

“What a lovely, caring, two-faced whore,” Joshua whispered. It would be hard not to agree with him. Tap, tap, said the rifle, ready to fire. Tap, tap.

He looked at those two again. Two shadows of women who he felt so close to and they both treated him like fucking dirt. They were probably the best creations, the most magnificent illusions produced by this system, almost human, as passionate and amazing as they could be, but now he was seeing clearly. His sister was as empty as everybody else, even if perfect in some sense. Rachel wasn’t real either.

“No one does.” The love of his life snapped out the rest of the joint. The burning remains disappeared below the darkness of the cliff. “It’s time. They’re waiting for us.”

“They do.” Kris agreed and let Rachel walk first.

Indeed, the merry bunch was already gathering around the lighthouse, opening the bottles of champagne and lurking at their watches nervously. It was almost the time, and any conversation, severe or not, would have to be continued in the next year. Rachel noticed they had already started counting even if minutes away, laughing and joking, sometimes arguing whose time was the most accurate. Arcadia Bay would deliver some fireworks in the first glimpse of 2014 anyway, but a personal count was part of everybody’s ritual. She looked around trying to find Chloe, who appeared by her side as soon as they reached the lighthouse.

“I fucking told you.” Josh slapped him upside the head. “I told you, and you didn’t believe me. I’m the only one you can trust. I told you that everybody else here is about to betray us. Look at them. Pretentious assholes thinking they are better than us, playing with you all the time. With you! They reject you, bully you, beat you up, and you do what they want. You! Rachel. Kris. Price. Even fucking Chase.” The drops of saliva were splashing on Nathan’s neck with every mentioned name. “You are not important enough to be hated. They just pity you, laugh at how wretched you are. Everybody here is against you. Everybody!”

“Except you.” Nathan nodded, stroking the shape of the rifle. Cold barrel, the bumpy line of the lock and the nice feel of the handle. His father liked to call his weapons his best friends, probably liked them more than any of his kids. Well, except Josh. Maybe.
“You bet, except me.” His brother hugged him for a second. “You have only me, little bro. Only me.”

“But… Mark!” Nathan desperately was trying to find a reasonable argument, something to stop them or at least consider another option. Jefferson would never forgive them for going that far. “What about Mark? He told us to stay low, he…”

Josh started to massage his left shoulder. Apparently, the frozen ground wasn’t very comfortable for him either despite the efforts and the constant wriggling. Jefferson was a good catch though, but Nathan didn’t understand how unimportant this guy was after all. Sure, it was nice to be fucked by him, Josh really enjoyed this brutal, wild fun, even if his brother was always so distressed after. The teacher was taking care of his younger brother after all, so it was a small price to pay for a good, reasonable company. Something that would make Nathan less alone and hopefully not that much confused.

It wasn’t working well lately, especially since Jefferson decided to chat so much with Amber, oh fuck that shit, Price, but the old dude would finally get back to Nathan. He always did.

“Mark is just a tool,” Josh explained. “A compass to show us the way. We will learn everything from him and walk away free. One day you’re gonna surpass him. You almost did a few times.” Nathan smiled shyly hearing a compliment that wasn’t that big of a lie. “And when it happens, he will join all the rotten deer in the woods. Him, and Price, and many, many, more. We are the real ones. Only us!”

His younger brother thought about it for a moment. Long hours in the darkroom, the photos, posing, the spotless white desk. Constant orders and scolding. Mark Jefferson seemed too real to be just a product of imagination. Too real to be a nightmare even if Nathan really wanted him to be fake.

“No.” He wanted to drop this rifle, leave it on the ground and turn back. Every face, sound, and name was melting in his head, giving him a huge headache but deep down Nathan knew it wasn’t the right thing to do. “No!”

“Yes.” Josh didn’t want to let go. He couldn’t let him miss this opportunity. Not today. “I’m your second half. I’m your brother. I have your back. I’m your rock. I’m your trust. I’m the blood of your blood. I know what’s best for us and I’m telling you now, aim at them!” He pointed at the empty space between two parked cars.

So Nathan aimed.

Seconds passed, changed into a minute and then into bigger chunks of time. The hourglass was swallowing another dose of sand, but it was meaningless anyway. Nathan wanted to give up, tired and cold after lying on the wet ground. Josh stopped him though, almost pressed to the ground forcing him to wait.

A few minutes later it paid off.

“Chloe? It’s almost midnight.” Rachel caught her by the car. Concerned that her girl was nowhere to be seen she started her search and the truck was the first obvious place to check.

“I know.” Her blue pirate nodded, untying knots and trying to remove the big, black canvas from the bed of her truck. The pile of fireworks still seemed untouched by the rain, but Chloe was afraid they wouldn’t really work. They all were pretty old though, probably useless and shit. “I just wanted to prepare stuff for the big boom.” She explained, but without much enthusiasm, feeling useless as well. The short talk with Max was harsh, and she couldn’t just stand in place looking at the sky afterward.
and trying to chat with people who hurt her friend or were about to.

Plus, Chloe liked to keep her hands busy.

Her beautiful blonde cheerleader came to her, stopped her fingers with the grip of her hands and turned the blue pirate to her.

“Big boom, huh?” She smiled sadly, stroking the line of Chloe’s chin.

Ten!

They already started counting, screaming every number, yelling it to the sky like the most important challenge of the passing year. Josh ignored the lighthouse group, pointing at the two girls standing by the old, rusty pickup.

“Aim well.” He whispered to his brother. “Don’t miss this one.”

Nine!

“I can’t.” Nathan cried. His fingers curled up in five small bundles, not willing to straighten up. It was impossible to even touch the trigger. Pulling it was out of the question. He noticed how filthy the red jacket had become. The holy grail of the Prescott family was covered in the dark, wet mud.

“You can.” Josh squeezed his arm so tightly that it probably left a bruise. “You must.”

Eight!

“How is she?”

Chloe winced and turned away her head. It was shitty that her best friend had to sign up for such an awful rollercoaster now. They said that the last day of the past year was predicting and foreshadowing the next one. If so, 2014 wouldn’t be so happy for Max.

“Uh. Not good.” She admitted, worrying about the little freckle more than she should. “I will need some time off tomorrow. You know, just to help her cope. It’s a big deal for her, Rach.”

Seven!

“Marriage is not a job, Chloe. You don’t need to apply for PTO. She needs you. I respect that.” The weed was making Rachel jealous. It didn’t mean it would deprive her of human decency. Max needed her best friend, somebody to talk to and she understood that her wife was the only one person who could play that part. “I really hope she will find her way, with Steph or not. And without you as her love interest.” She added, not able to resist.

Right now, the shiny, steel barrel was aimed directly at her.

Six!

“Love interest?” Chloe frowned but didn’t escape from the embrace. On the contrary. “Still jealous, Rach? She’s crying her eyes out because of Steph telling her to fuck off. You don’t need to worry. Besides… I… I need you.” She suddenly sniffled, then sobbed so glad that this whole shit with girls leaving other girls wasn’t her experience this time. It was terrible to feel grateful for being so lucky, so Chloe wept again. “I can’t function without you, Rach. I just….” The effect of the mix of booze and weed was always unpredictable. The blue pirate could get either horny, super sad or extremely clingy. Possibly all. Now, melting down in Rachel’s arms she was close to tears only because she felt
so damn loved. It was fine though. It felt right. Rachel was there, smiling, kissing her fears away. “I love you. So much.”

“Almost there,” Josh whispered, watching how Nathan’s fingers were slowly reaching the trigger. “Almost. There.”

*Five!*

“I can’t.” His younger brother couldn’t stop his own hands, greedily grasping on the lock. His mind didn’t communicate with his tensed body at all like he was under Josh’s spell now, and the only thing he could do was saying things that no one cared about. “I can’t.”

“You can, and you will.” Josh’s breath was heavy and sweet. He smelled like danger and grape juice. “It’s just another deer. Just a deer.”

*Four!*

“I love you too, baby. I really, really do.” Seeing her lips tremble, Rachel smiled softly. There was only one way to calm down this blue, high mess. “So, do you think it’s too soon for a midnight kiss?”

“Fuck that.” Chloe laughed. “It’s never too soon.”

They kissed in a very gentle, slow way.

Nathan watched them for a second. So in love and so relaxed in each other arms. Did he have the right to take it away from them? On the other hand, how could real happiness realistically last? Real. They weren’t real.

*Three!*


The kiss was still lasting. Nathan just wanted to stop them from caring so much, and their love for each other not being so obnoxiously visible. Those two… A fucking walking commercial for a sunny future. He would show them a real future, enchanted in an old, dusty hourglass. An hourglass that no one would be able to turn. A fucking tornado of time.

“I will always be here, Nat,” Joshua whispered and tightened his grip on his arm.

*Two!*

It was time for the final shot, the midnight strike. It was time to get real, to pay back for every humiliation, for every mean word, every punch. For everything he got deprived of or never felt. For every kiss, that Price tasted, but he didn’t. It was time.

“Always here.” His brother promised.

Nathan closed his eyes, shut them very, very tightly and put his finger on the trigger.

*One!*

One.

They didn’t hear the big boom. In one second, they felt the sharp gusts of wind, the cheering crowd, the squeaks of the old rusty a few feet away from them, then a big, angry light happened. The enormous, blinding blast that threw them on the ground like rag dolls that no one wanted.

Silence.

Nathan looked around feeling weirdly cold. Frozen. His hands were still shaking. Funny, one pull and so much destruction. Unrealistic. The barrel, now hot and still smoking was the only evidence that he did it. He finally did it. Him, not Josh. It didn’t feel so good though. Nathan wanted to vomit.

“Josh?” He turned around then rapidly got up feeling weirdly alone. “Joshua? Hey. Are you there? Say something. Josh?”

Then he understood. The counting. The final countdown had to chase his brother away like Nathan had done so many times. The dense forest was empty and silent, judging and waiting for Nathan to finally absorb the fundamental truth. It wasn’t about the world being made for him. It wasn’t about Rachel or Kris not really existing. It was way worse.

Clangtapclagtap. Nathan cried still afraid to take a single step. What if Josh would appear like right now and wouldn’t be able to find him? Just like older brothers couldn’t find their siblings in Disneyworld if they just wandered around. No, no, he always found him. Clangtaptaptap. Josh was always here.

“I’m sorry!” He yelled to the darkness, scared that his final choice of the target was the reason why Josh walked away. It was more like an accident though, he didn’t aim properly, that would be his explanation. “I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t. I’m not that strong. I will never be as great as you. Please, don’t leave me now. Not now. Please don’t.”

The gunpowder was making his eyes itchy. He coughed and walked a few steps, still looking for Joshua, forgetting he switched, switched so hard that his brother vanished into thin air. Disappeared with the last yelled number, the final countdown.

Fear. Silence. The fear had a smell too.

It reminded Nathan of the room. The room his mother never changed but always cleaned and sobbed quietly every time she walked in there. The room where his twin brother died a few months after he was born, despite all the desperate attempts, all their father’s money and the best doctors trying to save his life. The brother who never had the right to live and had changed his father so much through his last, weak breath. The brother who transformed Sean Prescott from a harsh but understanding father into a bitter monster who always expected everybody else to do better. The brother who changed his mother into the shadow of her former self.

The bother who was worthy and brave, surprising and charming and who never existed, or existed only for a short while.

Joshua had always been a part of Nathan though, whispering, humming, singing his song and hissing, when his younger brother did something wrong. Joshua, who raped and murdered, played with people like they were toys, who pulled the triggers and screamed in joy when Nathan watched everything in terror. It was always him. Joshua. His brave, great twin brother, a little bit crazy, but who was normal anyway?

The bother who was more real than anybody else.

“Josh?” Nathan cried, desperately searching around. The branches were hitting him in the face,
slapping him and trying to wake him up. He broke a few of them, but there were too many. “Josh? Please, come back!” Was the countdown final? Did it work because Nathan wanted it to work or was it an ultimate switch, and he would never see Josh again? He missed him so much now, even if hated some second ago.

The silence of the forest was his only answer. Josh wasn’t real. He had never been real and never would be, but his voice in Nathan’s head was more than genuine and authentic. The constant, wise advice on how to survive another day, how not to give up, how to become a better person. There was a huge price to pay, including those horrible things they had to do, but it was worth it. Was it?

_Was it?_

Josh asked him to do those things. Josh did those things, not Nathan. No. No. No. He pulled the trigger. He had opened the door to Kate’s room. He gave Kelly the final dose, knowing it was way too much. He punched Samantha and broke her ribs, laughing at her when she cried and begged for mercy. He almost killed Victoria in Bowers’ van and nearly strangled her in Blackwell’s hallway. He wanted to punish Chase like he punished Kelly. And Juliet. And many, many more. Him. Josh.

It was him, never Nathan.

Now, Josh was gone. Maybe for a minute, maybe for two, or perhaps forever. Unpredictable asshole, a dickhead that appeared when and where he wanted, never bothered to announce himself. He was so missed now, so needed, but wasn’t around. Perhaps he would never be around again.

Choking on his tears, Nathan stumbled upon his rifle, picked it up and ran to his car still crying, leaving the burning hell behind and never turning back.

“Jesus Christ. What the… Was it planned?” Kris reached them first, checking on Rachel who fell closer to the van, then on Chloe who was already trying to get up and find how basic directions worked. Perplexed between which of the surfaces was the ground and confusing it from the starry sky, she still wasn’t aware of what actually occurred. Then she looked at her truck or what was left of it and almost fucking cried.

The old rusty was gone. Dead. There was nothing to save. Chloe had no idea what happened though. They were just standing there, kissing and the car literally exploded, despite a lack of any spark, and started to vomit the colorful lights from the top of its bed. All at once. She checked the pickup a few times, making sure that everything was damn safe but somehow it wasn’t.

“No. It wasn’t.” The blue rebel murmured shaking her head and dropped to the ground still deafened by the eruption. Not sure what she just experienced, Chloe decided to just lie on the ground for a second longer. Her head was spinning, thousands of colorful flashes danced in front of her eyes, and she felt like throwing up. So she did, twice, cursing the idea of drinking and smoking today. Turning on her side she tried to get her senses back, but the blue confusion was uncertain which one she should activate first. The hearing was a problem, seeing wasn’t working much, and the only thing she could taste was dirt and wet ground.

“Oh God, Chloe…” Max appeared by her side, holding her arm, trying to help. “Are you ok? Are you both ok?”

“Yeah. I think. Rach?” Chloe whispered and then panicked, looking around. Pushing Max away she tried to stand up. “Sunshine?” Seeing her girl already sitting down and holding her head with her mouth wide open was a huge relief. “Sunshine! Are you ok?”
Rachel couldn’t hear anything but one high-pitched continuous sound. Nodding, she guessed the question rather than actually hearing it. Chloe crawled to her as fast as she could and was saying something, but the dense noise in Rachel’s head didn’t let her understand a thing. The leather jacket they both loved so much fell from her arms and got pushed off the cliff, drowning in the ocean a few hundred feet down. One more of the acceptable loses though. Her Chloe was safe. She held her as close as she could not willing to let her go even for a second.

“I’m fine. I think.” It was an understatement. Rachel couldn’t think at all. Noticing she was bleeding from scratched knees and elbows, she swore loudly and then again, still surprised she couldn’t hear her own voice. Wearing this cheerleader piece of shit was the worst idea on earth.

“The fuck was that?” Steph asked with her eyes wide open instinctively standing by Kris’s side and trying to protect her. Their fingers laced in a tight grip. In a moment like this they stopped pretending even from each other that this was just a recollected friendship. Wanting to be close they finally hugged, still shocked by the explosion, but didn’t dare to kiss yet.

It was a matter of time.

Max couldn’t look at them anymore. “Happy New Year, everybody,” she whispered bitterly.

The truck got shaken.

Rachel gasped, remembering what was still hidden in the glove compartment. The bracelet was put there again, safely stored with Sera’s phone number, Chloe’s new wallet, a few CDs that they both loved and tons of unpaid parking tickets or other garbage. All of this was gone now, dying in an explosion of colors and shapes, flying up to the stars above, dancing between them with the official, more than modest presentation prepared by Arcadia Bay’s New Year committee.

The dragons and spinners, the snaps and snakes, were all swirling, spinning and rolling on the leftover of the truck’s corpse that had been part of them since the very beginning. The skeleton of the vehicle exploded one more time, lifted a good foot under the ground by another blast. Rachel looked at Chloe, who watched the destruction with her fists clenched. This old, beaten-up car was one of the most important things to her. It was her place, her home. Their second home, built with some dreams, desperation and things no one wanted, miraculously still driving till this very day and now bursting into flames time after time.

Rachel felt ridiculously guilty like karma was taking its toll and getting payback for one Oregon forest burnt down three and a half years ago. Sinking into Chloe’s arms, she felt how tense her girl had become, how much it cost her to witness this scene and not able to do anything. There was no way of saving this old truck but to watch the fireworks on the bright, night sky.

Fucking irony.

“There goes my bracelet.” She whispered, hugging her closer.

Chloe looked at her in disbelief and responded with a low, raspy and a bit shaky voice:

“There goes my truck.”
“I love you,” Chloe said gently laying on her chest and playing with one loose lock of golden hair. United with Rachel through the touch of bare skin to skin and watching the hazel appearing in the crack of eyelids, she didn’t even move much, enjoying the lazy bliss of early morning. The cold, dry dawn broke late today, as was in the habit of late January and languor wasn’t in any means sagacious, although the blue pirate ran out of fucks to give either about the ticking time or her sturdy, mental self-protection. “I love you.” She repeated with a broad but serene smile not taking her eyes off of Rachel’s face.

Her girl smiled back, tilted her head against the pillow and found herself not able to stop watching the blue rebel either. Something switched, changed again, transforming slowly not only when it came to Chloe but their relationship in general. First, a lullaby sung when she couldn’t fall asleep, then no fit was thrown when she announced her participation in a drama lab camp, now this. Simple confessions got more frequent lately, becoming more natural than breathing, as the blue pirate slowly liberated herself from the constant doubt, content and relaxed, embracing her vulnerable side fully, not even expecting those words to be said back. Chloe got it anyway, because who could resist this amazing, sensitive creature and she deserved the best, including the obvious ‘I love you too’ whispered with lips half bitten. “Happy anniversary.” The blue rebel murmured and kissed Rachel’s chest softly, still with no intention to even get up for breakfast, neither the carnal nor the regular one, even if the box of Captain Crunch cereal was within reach.

“What did I miss?” Rachel whispered back shyly, still touched by the moment and puzzled a bit. She had wished for this change for months and now felt perplexed by the sensitive side widely uncovered and presented with no shame or regret. Nothing to be ashamed of though, but it was strange and uncomfortable with how new things were. Apparently, Chloe was damn serious about fulfilling her secret New Year's resolution, finally letting herself to forget about the tense fears or, more likely, not allowing them to take over. Previously, when she had put a few words together to express her feelings, was either in a state of a vast agitation or simply wanted to prove something, muttering it hastily. No jokes, no awkward shift of the shoulders, no running away with the blue trustful gaze this time. At this new level of a marriage game, with no expectations whatsoever, she was repeating it freely quite often, without an obscure suspicion that she would be laughed at or afraid of possible consequences exposing her sensitivity. New. Good. Strange. Still good. Different though. If somebody told Rachel a few months ago that her wife would change so rapidly she would burst in laughter, secretly hoping for this impossible wish to happen. Finally achieving what she wanted, she found herself being a hard believer though and getting used to something so wonderful was taking her almost as much time as Chloe getting used to being loved.

Loved so much.

The blue finger was traveling down Rachel’s cleavage, then getting back up, circling through the arches of neck and chin, trying to capture the warmth of the skin, remembering everything that already had been memorized. Every stroke was slow, lacking greed or introduction to something more intense, just like in one of the moments just after, but there was no after today, no heat to cool down or sensitivity emerging accidentally just after a loud, severe climax.

“Today is exactly three months since we got married, so…” Even the tone of the blue voice changed in the last couple of weeks, not breaking in an awkward silence or insecurity, striving for acceptance.

“Only three months?” Surprised, Rachel peered at the calendar on the wall. Not that she really had to, perfectly aware of the date and hour, but was feeling oddly uncomfortable and needed to take a
break from this cute, adorable love fest. Always watchful and alert to ensure Chloe she was no longer alone, she would never be alone and, fuck, nothing would ever separate them, was part of her daily chores and recently she felt a bit out of place.

Wasn’t that something she really wanted though?

Below the wild waves splashing under a dark, majestic pirate ship, rows of numbers laid down in lines of weeks, decorated by small notes, tagged by a few doodles and stickers. Chloe was right. Exactly three months today. “Time flies,” she added, feeling how dry her throat was.

It seemed more like three years. Or a century.

Her blue rebel muttered something, still totally absorbed by looking straight into her eyes and it made Rachel blush a little. A long time ago, under different circumstances, maybe a week or two before Christmas, her pirate would’ve backed off immediately, not sure what to do with herself after being caught guilty of such admiration. Now, she didn’t care or simply wanted to be noticed, challenging Rachel with every fondle of her fingertip. Chloe Price, with self-confidence that was built not faked was taking her girl’s voice away though, captivating and chanting instead. New. Amazing. Strange. Still awesome. Not even willing to take advantage of the situation, this amazing monster was just staring and smiling lightly. What a terrible freaking wizard.

A second of supposed silence changed into a minute and then stretched beyond reckonable time. The dim light flickered, disturbed by the shadows of the first students who were rushing to the cafeteria for early breakfast, calling each other and running fast to avoid the morning freeze. The sharp, subdued clatter of slammed doors filled the dorm hallway, commingling with the quick clack of steps of those hurrying to the bathroom. The idle turmoil didn’t disturb their own private silence though as they ignored the clatter around them, focusing on each other, another touch or a small kiss.

Eternity never tasted so good before.

“You’re beautiful,” Chloe said simply.

Still speechless, or speechless even more, Rachel brushed the blue hair to the rhythm of the big, white clock’s song, wondering how this unruly rebel finally gave up, surrendered and let herself to be tamed. Well, not entirely, but she had never seen Chloe like that before, or it rarely happened, usually under some kind of not entirely legal influence. Sure, the brave, reckless pirate had shown her susceptible side from time to time but was always prepared for a counter attack, hiding her feelings under a burst of passion or in a sudden retreat, surrounding herself by the spikes of her own mental armor. Now, there were none. Now, she was naked.

Rachel found herself not willing to get up anytime soon.

“You know what? Fuck school,” she said, stuttering a bit and trying to find the proper rhythm of words, not selling out her abashment. “Fuck it. Let’s stay in bed, chill, order pizza, watch something, and...” A soft chuckle cut her off, but it was for the best since her throat got so tight randomly and speaking was quite a hardship.

“Rachel Price, are you try to lead me down the wrong path now?” Chloe’s hand sunk in the blonde hair with fingers drowning in gold. The morning light was so bright that it almost disappeared in the blaze of white. “What happened to your need of 100% attendance?”

“I don’t care.”

Who would’ve thought that the lack of care would grant her a long, loving kiss?
She voraciously dragged Chloe closer, irritated by the tangled sheets and cotton blankets but her pirate took over, letting her know that, despite their packed schedule, there was no rush and she wanted to take things slow or not even wishing them to escalate. The wall clock was warning them with its monotonous pulse, having a different opinion in that matter, but their lips met again and crashed in a well-known hunger. Rachel, still a bit baffled, started to cover her bewilderment in a more passionate caress, but the calm, blue smirk between the kisses took her off guard and left her concussed once again. Her pirate decided to keep torturing her with more pleasant surprises though, holding tight and not letting the situation to get wilder. Used to games and plays herself, Rachel forgot her own lines, willing to let Chloe keep her in her arms for the whole morning, damn, the whole day, if her wife wished so. Feeling the blue hand on her thigh, now shamelessly wrapped around the rebel’s waist, she trembled and felt yet another smile under her lips.

“So, you don’t care?”

“No. I don’t…” And Rachel had to bite her lip again when another brief, fleeting touch burned her skin. She was played like a fiddle by someone who knew precisely which strings to pull and did it with care. This blue monster, reborn in a new surprising form, knew her too well and planned the dance with care, foreseeing every move, moan, kiss or mischief. It was kind of a trap, but Rachel felt damn glad being jailed. Whatever act her girl was planning she was keen to oblige, even if she would have to suffer a bit from her own impatience.

“Uh.” Chloe stopped suddenly and lifted up breaking the storm of kisses. Her breath was heavier than Rachel had noticed, and her cheeks were flushed with red. So, she wasn’t the only one carried away by the moment. Good. “Fuck.” It sounded pitiful, as the pirate ducked her head in surrender and kissed Rachel again, but quickly. The morning was officially over, but she still didn’t want to move an inch. “I would love to ditch school and all, but I have to meet up with my mom and bring her the college papers before you go to your photo session, so…” She shifted a bit, pulling up the comforter to shield them both from the room’s coldness and still feeling terribly guilty. Usually, it wouldn’t be a problem to steal an hour or two more, but since the day was about to get busy and they had one car to share, everything had to be carefully planned. The transportation problem brought a lot of tension between them though as the argument of who would drive or need the red Mustang more became part of their daily routine. She absolutely hated the fact that she had to rely on Rachel’s birthday gift, missing the deep scowl of the truck’s old engine, grumpy and irked when forced to ride shotgun, but there was no other solution. For now. For a very long now. They thought briefly about buying some piece of junk, but finances were tight, and it was plainly ridiculous to spend so much money on a car that they would have to sell in a few months. Sending one vehicle to Boston was expensive enough, not to mention that driving in a big city was a luxury, not a must, so Chloe lost her hopes of owning a truck of her own in the long-term. That was fucked up though, but unable to find a way around it, the blue pirate decided to focus on the good things in life. The best part of it was lying in front of her, smiling, kissing her back and willing to surrender her car keys from time to time.

Life wasn’t bad. Oh, fuck, life was wonderful.

That discovery was surprising even for the blue rebel. She finally got accustomed to the fact that they both were about to build something solid that would last for quite a while. A simple recognition that they had more mornings like this one ahead of them was a bit baffling. Funny. She kinda had known it before nevertheless slowly but surely was getting used to this thought, that Rachel wasn’t going anywhere, not now or ever, and not only because she was tangled between the sheets, nailed to the bed, or too slothful to get up. “No lazy morning for us. But since you wanted to celebrate…” She tilted her head. “What would you say to an awfully romantic date at the coast tonight? Just you, me, and the starry sky above us.”
Rachel’s eyebrow furrowed. It was quite some time since they went for something that could be called a date.

“And the moral law inside of us, huh?” Stretching a bit and seeing her breath changing into a white, vague mist, she noticed how icy the room was. According to the newest Blackwell brochure, the dorms were supposed to be luxurious. The heating system probably missed the memo then. “Isn’t it a bit too cold for that?” She asked, not willing to freeze her ass off even more.

“I will keep you warm.” Came the promise. “I will always keep you warm.” And then Chloe wrapped the blankets around her more, trying to slip out of her arms at the same time. Rachel tried to keep her in place but didn’t react in time, and then a second later the only source of warmth was cotton, wool, and a sweet memory.

The blue pirate got up, stretched quickly, winked to her and started to walk around the room, fighting with the morning freeze and the need to get back under blankets. Blackwell Academy had been renovated recently, including the dorms, but the heater worked as it liked, without much plan or coordination, even if all of the students reported it decidedly, demanding a quick fix. Knowing their luck, it would be done in the summer when no one needed it or remember about the problem. Winters weren’t usually severe in Oregon, and the snow melted over two weeks ago, crying a river on every school’s pathway, but even thirty degrees could be deadly if experienced just after a passionate make-out session.

Oh, alright, it was maybe sixty-five in the room. Fine. Still cold.

Rachel was looking at her still draped in slumbers, upset to see as Chloe’s nakedness was disappearing piece by piece. The procedure started with a hiss when her wife noticed that they’d entirely forgotten to do the laundry and she had to hunt for some clean clothes in the cold mess of a cluttered closet. Then, slowly her beautiful blue butterfly started to put her everyday uniform together. A shirt, a hoodie, underwear that was fortunately saved from the Christmas gift package, hopefully still clean socks, alright, warm socks, as Rachel asked her not to get sick for the third time this winter, pants and so on. The clothes seemed heavier than usual especially since a few moments ago Chloe didn’t need any of them at all.

Dressing up and being watched, the blue rebel felt a bit uneasy, and not because of the lovely beginning of the day, her own bare ass or her girl's desperate attempts to lure her back to bed. Sure, it was kinda great to finally open up and all, but Chloe had more things in mind that she would rather keep for herself and herself only. Rachel didn’t have to know that she didn’t have to meet Joyce today but planned to see David. Rachel didn’t have to be aware of the fact that her step-dad examined the burnt truck a few weeks ago, and they both wanted to check it one more time since it finally got transported to the junkyard, where no one would bother them or listen to the wild guess about what had happened. Rachel didn’t have to worry about the ex-military vet's assumption that the explosion was caused by a gunshot, or more precisely, a rifle bullet to the tank. Rachel didn’t have to freak the fuck out that somebody indeed tried to kill them or damaged on purpose, and there was only one person with that kind of guts whom Chloe could think of. This particular person had been supposedly removed from their lives by Rachel's biological mother, and since then they hadn’t even mentioned his name even once. The blue pirate wasn’t sure if Frank even owned a rifle but was certain that this dickhead could put his hands on one if really wanted to. Would he? Well, if not him, who else? It seemed chillingly reasonable for him to seek some blasting revenge. David carefully stated that maybe it was just a hunter who got lost in the woods and his weapon misfired. It was a very safe and convenient explanation that neither of them fully believed, but faced with the absence of any other options, both agreed to.

Who the fuck would be hunting on New Year’s Eve though?
Joyce was as much in the dark as Rachel, still giving her daughter tons of shit because of playing with old fireworks, supposed lack of responsibility and lecturing her about safety in general. It was better for her not to suspect a thing either since she would demand a more official explanation, maybe even report the whole incident to the police. Law enforcement wasn’t Chloe’s biggest enemy at the moment, but they would start asking questions and could easily come to the conclusion that a bunch of highly intoxicated teenagers were partying with some guns and ammo. That wouldn’t look good on the record of somebody who was about to start their first year at Harvard or MIT and wanted desperately to drop out of the radar of Arcadia Bay’s officers. The past wasn’t easy to erase, and the last thing Rachel and she needed was a lovely a few hours long session at the police station explaining themselves, not to mention that James Amber would be notified immediately and… Ah, that would open yet another can of worms. Plus, Kris Prescott was there, and even if Chloe wasn’t a big fan of her getting between Steph and Max and complicating everything, she didn’t want to put this girl in trouble. Her being a part of this motherfucking dynasty was enough of a punishment.

So yeah, it was better for Rachel not to know a thing. For now.

Dishonesty wasn’t Chloe’s favorite sport, as she couldn’t help being bluntly sincere, but was it really lying though? David could be wrong. That was another option that she somehow considered and hoped to confirm today. With his PTSD and a massive boner for weapons of every kind, he was seeing gunmen on every corner. It was probably why he agreed to keep this discovery a secret, possibly preparing for a war on his own. One good thing that came out of his annoying confidence of being able to deal with everything alone.

Well, what was done was done. If the beginning of the year taught Chloe anything, it was to change her ways when it came to the relationship with Rachel. It happened naturally, as an organic transition, and the only thing the blue pirate wanted was to believe in the amazing, bright future for them and ignore the rest. They could’ve died there, on the cliff just by the lighthouse, burning down to freaking embers just like her beloved old rusty. They could’ve been swept to the ocean, got hit by a firework, or just got pushed on one of the rocks. That fucking experience scared her to death and forced her to look at all things differently, even if the transition wasn’t smooth. Well, fuck it. It was new, alright, but good. Still strange, but awesome.

Today, if somebody asked Chloe Price to stand in front of the whole school and declare her love for Rachel, she would fucking do it. Well, hopefully with a prepared script because she wasn’t that great with improvised public speeches. It was getting easier just between the two of them and stuttering, stunned Rachel was a nice bonus or, to be frank, a delightful award. Chloe started to wonder why she never did it before and couldn’t remember the reason. Like being shy and shit, but it wasn’t that hard. And Rachel loved her no matter what, so it wasn’t a big deal, right?

Almost ready, she reached for her old jacket that Joyce patched up and sewed up in a few places. Before Rachel started to extend her wife’s wardrobe, it was the only winter coat that Chloe owned and used. The worn-out leather jacket belonged to her dad, and she almost beat it to death carrying it around all the time. Now, somehow presentable, it had to suffice, since they were damn fucking broke and had to save every cent for the move to Boston. So, no second car, no new expensive coats, no dinner in a fancy restaurant, but a walk on the empty and cold beach instead.

Running through her pockets, she noticed one of the hidden ones that she hadn’t seen before. This jacket was like a fucking attic, always hiding more secrets like old movie tickets or wrinkled receipts stashed there by William Price himself and then forgotten in the meantime. Cleaning them all up would be too painful, so the blue rebel always stuck to using only a few of the compartments, afraid to be rammed by an aching memory out of nowhere. Now too curious, she opened up the inner pocket and started to ransack it. Some random piece of paper, an unknown phone number, a business card of three Seals Motel and…
“Condoms?” She heard Rachel and turned back to her as surprised as her wife. “Baby, did you forget to tell me something?” Her blonde angel giggled, grabbing a smoke and the lighter, still not willing to start the day up anytime soon. She was supposed to have her photos taken today, so a longer nap wouldn’t hurt, especially if it deescalated the possibility of eyebags appearing.

“I guess my parents really didn’t want me to have any siblings.” Chloe shrugged still holding the packets and not sure what to do with them. Preserving this part of her father’s life wasn’t her priority by any means. Of course, her parents had to have sex, but Chloe would rather not go into details of this particular procedure. She lurked at Rachel, who lit up her cig, looking all beautiful and tempting and unwillingly seducing and... Damn. Fuck. Hell. Why did she have to go? “I can’t blame them though.” Chloe chuckled desperately trying to change the subject and throwing the condoms to the trash can and missing. “Look at me, who would like to have more of those?”

“Well, at least I don’t have to be distracted by a potential hot, younger sister of yours,” Rachel responded, snickering a bit. The idea that the condoms could really belong to her blue pirate didn’t really cross her mind for longer than fifteen seconds. The memory of Elliot Roger melted long before last year’s snow. “Or being annoyed by your younger brother. Have you ever wanted to have a sibling?”

Chloe paused her morning dance, scratching her neck and thinking.

“Maybe. I think most people do.” She shrugged, grabbing a toothbrush. “But I had Max, so it was fine.” Then it wasn’t fine when her friend had moved to Seattle, and perhaps a brother or sister would’ve helped her to survive the painful few years without William, or anybody else in that matter. On the other hand, there would be another human being suffering so much or perhaps dealing with the situation easier than Chloe. Both of the potential outcomes weren’t tempting. She turned to Rachel. “You?”

“I’m one of those rare exceptions who never really strived for it.”

“Because you wanted all the attention for yourself?” Brushing her teeth and trying to find the textbooks, the blue pirate was hard to understand. Mumbling and gasping she circled around the room gathering her survival kit for today.

Perhaps it was just a glimmer of light, but Rachel’s eyes seemed to get darker when she took another drag of smoke. It took her two taps of ash to construct an answer.

“Sort of.”

The blue pirate waited a second hoping for her girl to elaborate, but Rachel apparently didn’t want to dwell on her family issues. James Amber was yet another name never mentioned among them, even if he didn’t interfere much and contacted his daughter only when completely necessary. Sighing, Chloe contemplated when or if she ever should touch this topic again but was damn sure it wouldn’t be welcomed well. At some point, it would be brought back one way or another though. Yet another catch with this glorious, happy eternity together.

Finding the car keys, she was ready to leave, when a grumpy complaint stopped her in the last second.

“Chloe? Didn’t you forget something?”

Turning back, the blue rebel grinned and kneeled by the bed quickly. She would never forget a goodbye kiss although it was nice to pretend that she kinda did. It tasted better, and Chloe felt even more wanted, questioning her arrangement choices and leaving the room in general. Rachel already
killed her smoke and was now awaiting a proper explanation and suitable payback.

“No, I was just delaying it to get a better one.” And before she was able to take a breath, Chloe got pulled closer almost falling between the sheets and drowning in the morning warmth once again. Damn right, she was wanted. “Holy shit, you really want to keep me for yourself. You are a very dangerous woman, Rach.”

“Your woman.” She heard the giggle and got imprisoned in those arms one more time.

“That’s the best part.” Touching Rachel’s cheek Chloe smiled seeing how her wife snuggled into her palm. “See you in a bit.” She kissed her nose, got up and walked out before the desire of getting back became more overwhelming.

Still tasting the last kiss on her lips, Rachel lied in bed for a bit longer, wondering if the feeling of being weirdly lonely would pass with time, as she wanted Chloe back by her side now, in the worst possessive way. Missing her after a minute was childish, but she allowed herself to drown in a daydream pondering how nice it would be to not have any obligations whatsoever. After all the horrors they had gone through, it was sometimes hard to believe how great things turned out for them, how bright the future was and how much those blue eyes were sparkling. Rachel got all she wanted though. A loving partner who kept her in check not willing to indulge if she showed her drama queen side but loved and supported her on every step. It felt weird not to battle over it all the time though.


So, that was how victory tasted. A tad bitter, sweet and sweaty, chilled by the unheated dorm room. Blue. Sharing a life with Chloe seemed more like another journey though than an ultimate accomplishment.

Speaking of a journey, it was time to go, as the white ticking clock was trying to point out for a while now. Throwing away the covers, Rachel decided to follow her pirate steps and finish at least one task before noon. Oh, fuck. Laundry. This whole victory had a downside. The blue pirate preferred to spend an entire evening whispering sweet nothings instead of sacrificing herself and doing the chores. Just great. Alright, Chloe would have to survive the fact that one-third of her Christmas gift would be used by its giver. The rest of the pile was very hard to identify, so she gave up after a few minutes.

The chill of the room was helping with gathering the thoughts, including some unpleasant ones. Chloe didn’t have to know that Victoria Chase was up Rachel’s ass once again. She didn’t have to be aware that the Blackwell queen utterly obsessed with her photography teacher decided to take a role in the school play, using all her power to force Dana to drop out. Chloe didn’t have to worry about Rachel’s hard time with this snake, who not only tried to ruin her performance playing indeed one the main antagonists but also disturbing every single conversation with Mark she had witnessed. Not able to understand that two people could have a spiritual connection, Victoria even started to suggest that there was something more going on; something that would put Jefferson’s status at risk and would for sure make Chloe angry. Miss Chase couldn’t stand the fact that her teacher could treat somebody like Rachel as an equal, inviting her to dinner or for a coffee after class and sharing his own secrets and life stories. For Victoria, it seemed abnormal or scandalous, and perhaps it really could be concerning for an outsider, but Mark Jefferson, always kind and well-groomed, never crossed the line, treating all his protégées with full respect. Rachel, who held the reputation of a married gay girl, was laughing at her rival’s allegations but knew for a fact that this bitch could easily make things up and destroy this extraordinary friendship. A friendship, whose specifics Rachel decided to keep only for herself. It was supposed to be her secret anyway, as her blue pirate said. So,
it was. It wasn’t really lying.

So yeah, it was better for Chloe not to know a thing. For now.

Then she heard a knock. Rachel sighed and rolled her eyes, sure it was her blue pirate who forgot something or decided to get back for one more kiss. Dumbass. Cute, adorable dumbass. Not bothered to cover herself with anything, she walked to the door and burst it open, ready to be pushed against the wall or to the bed by a hungry, blue rebel.

Nothing like that happened.

“Max?” Rachel blinked. “What… brings you to our little lair?”

The little freckle rapidly changed color from pale to bursting red and then flashed back to confused white. She stared at her with her mouth half open then desperately fixed her sight on the gray, stained carpet of the corridor. It took Rachel a good minute to notice that she was standing there almost naked and if the breeze of the nearly empty passage wasn’t so chilling, she perhaps wouldn’t have noticed at all. Damn it.

“I’m sorry, I…” Max felt like running away, but it seemed like a childish solution especially among adults. Looking down was also stupid or maybe respectful? Choking, she decided to inspect her feet instead hoping Rachel would just slam the door in her face and solve the dilemma. “I just wanted to check if…”

“It’s fine.” Rachel hissed, noticing Victoria marching to the bathroom, rapidly slowed down and was watching them with her eyes wide-open. Yet another joke she would have to swallow during today’s photo session, and Mark would hear everything about it. Fucking great. “Come in.” She dragged Max in and slammed the door. Poor freckle, blushing and stumbling, was acting like it was the first set of tits she had seen in her life. “Sorry.” Rachel murmured, turning back and picking up one of Chloe’s shirts, nonchalantly spread on the floor. One more good thing about sharing her life with a messy pirate. “How are things?”

“Things?” Max blinked still in a state of shock. Sitting at the edge of the bed she started to jerk her hoodie’s laces in sharp, nervous pulls. “My things? Uh… Pretty shitty lately. I mean…” Even if Rachel covered herself already, the thing that Max saw was still flashing in front of her eyes as an uncomfortable memory. It felt like peering into a part of Chloe’s life that she never wanted to know more about. Utterly confused, she lost her chain of thought and not prepared for small talk shared more than she wanted. Rachel probably didn’t give a rat’s ass about her problems. No one did. “Uh, I’m not very good at this.” She stated carefully, but the expectations to hear more were already awoken. “You know the feeling when you have to meet the person you love every day and being reminded that actually, this person doesn’t care anymore?” She looked at Rachel and ran away with her gaze again. Why was she even there with her best friend’s girlfriend? Uh, wife. Uh, fuck. “Probably not…”

“You would be surprised. We are not that different.” Rachel walked to her, putting a hand on Max’s shoulder. That was a first as far as the little freckle could recall. She trembled but stayed in place. It was weird. And strange. New. “Anyway, anything I can do?”

“You have your own stuff to deal with.”

“Max… Dude…” Rachel sighed and sat by her side, noticing that they had never really talked about Steph or other issues since it was usually Chloe’s territory. The girl was still devastated by the turn of recent events and probably wouldn’t mind more support. Or Rachel hoped so. “First, I’m freaking good with multitasking, alright? Second…” Another long sigh. “I know we’re not the best buddies,
but if you need to talk or just rant, I’m here. Problems with girls are not something I’m totally unfamiliar with if you catch my drift. And no,” she grinned. “I don’t have to refer to Chloe all the time.”

They looked at each other for a few long seconds, trying to find common ground or how far they could go with this conversation.

“You would, and I don’t really need to hear that.” Max shook her head surprised by how straightforward she could be. The last thing she needed was Rachel’s advice. It was so wrong on so many levels. Plus, she already made a decision or was damn close to doing so. “Uh, do you have the old photos of Chloe I took on my birthday? It’s just for one of my projects.” She lied swiftly. “I will bring them back, I promise.”

It took Rachel aback, but she got up and nodded.

“Sure, let me check. I think I’ve seen them somewhere…” Running through shelves and drawers, she noticed how tense she became. Being around Max Caulfield, especially alone, was always making her somehow nervous even if Rachel would prefer to dance naked than admit it. “…Around. Sorry, Chloe is not particularly great with putting stuff in its place.”

“I’m aware.” The little freckle stopped tormenting the laces and trying to find something to do with her hands she started playing with the vintage, expired condoms. It took her a while to spot what she was holding and dropped the silver packets immediately. Max certainly didn’t have to know why those two would use those items for. Well, fine, they had sex. Great. Together. Fine. She didn’t have to be informed about details, accidentally or not. “She’s always been like that. Messy, I mean.” She specified, just in case.

Rachel didn’t pay attention to her discoveries pretending to be way too busy. Bringing William Price to the picture would sound like a lame excuse though. It was better to ignore it.

“Glad we found a way to work around it, didn’t we? Here.” The set of polaroids landed on Max’s palm. “They came out pretty dark though.”

The little freckle looked at the photos, staring at each of them intensely, as if searching for clues or some hidden details. Chloe smoking in the parking lot. Steph and Rachel by the newly bought white van. Rachel’s blue shirt hanging on the back of the truck. Max’s selfie taken just before hitting the road. It was a hell of a day, one of the worst in her life, but one of the last ones that Max would consider as happy. Hopeful.

“Yeah, just the times were a bit brighter then.” She whispered thinking how much her reality had changed in the past four months.

Rachel watched her not sure what to do. The request for the photos seemed odd, to say the least, but Max’s reaction seemed even stranger. Holding the polaroids like her life depended on it, she was close to tears and weirdly confident at the same time. Perhaps she was collecting the last hopeful memories or treasuring more hopes. The latter seemed dangerous though, even if Rachel fully understood the need. Steph was out of Max’s reach though, in her past not in the future.

“Brighter maybe, but still tough.” Rachel stated, thinking intensely about how to make the situation better. Repeating that everything would be fine wouldn’t help shit. Referring to her own experiences would bring only more dense silence and any other advice would be theoretical. Rachel had never had to deal with a severe break-up since she won Chloe back and was able to turn all of her failures to victories. Well, more or less. Dealing with life without the blue rebel was something that she didn’t even want to imagine. “Last year was a bumpy road, and this one also started with a hella blast. I’m
Max lifted her head abruptly, and her eyes narrowed.

“That’s a really bad idea. With time I mean.” She said against everything she was just considering.

“You think so?” Rachel shrugged, confused by the harsh reaction. “Wouldn’t it be nice to take all the chances that you missed?” Then noticing that the discussion wandered into a hazardous field, she retracted. “Sorry, too far?”

Talking to Max Calefied always seemed like walking, or rather dancing salsa, on half-melted ice on a deep lake, especially when it came to her personal life that the little freckle was guarding like a hawk. No details, no confessions, but a riddle here and there, just to make it more awkward. Maybe that was how Chloe got this annoying attitude of withdrawing herself constantly, avoiding any emotional confrontation or attacking blindly with a subtlety of a brick in the face. Yeah, she was getting better recently, even too good, but the memory was still fresh. Tired of years of similar experiences, Rachel was glad that she didn’t engage in a conversation with Max pretty often, although was willing to take the challenge if her help would be somehow useful.

Didn’t look like it was needed though. Like at all.

“It doesn’t work that way. I think.” Max responded, speaking carefully as every word had a certain weight or double meaning she was trying to keep for herself. “Every time you actually change something in the past, it would open up a new branch of possibilities.” Her selfie at the parking lot. Her innocent, dark, little, blurry selfie taken in September. Max bit her lip. “Trying to find the ultimate best one would take you an entirety.”

“What’s an eternity if you can change everything?”

The pale, cold fingers tightened on the photos, marking them with smudges and first wrinkles. The polaroids weren’t easy to bend, protecting their content with a rigid, stiff force of thick paper, but Max managed to damage them a bit. Something inside of her was calling to tear those photos apart, rip them to pieces but she prevented herself from doing so.

In the last fucking moment.

“It’s lonely.” She whispered softly.

Before Rachel could say something or even think of a proper response, suddenly the door got open, and Chloe burst in with an interesting letter in her hand, bringing the fog of cold breath and steaming with excitement.

“Sunshine! I’ve got…” The blue rebel paused rapidly stating at them, frozen in half-step. If Rachel didn’t know better, she would assume that her girl got crazy jealous. The situation was indeed a bit questionable, with Max sitting on the bed with condoms by her feet and Rachel wearing well… barely anything. “Hi, Super Max, what are you doing here?” Chloe asked a little bit too coldly.

“Chatting.” They responded in unison, incriminating themselves even more.

The silence got thicker, filling the room with a cold, unasked question.

Not sure what to do, the blue pirate closed the door slowly, looking around for any kind of hint or explanation. This whole cold shower of suspicions and the hot shiver running through her spine were ridiculous though. Max was probably just stopping by, as she never did for fuck’s sake, and Rachel
just wanted to be nice to her, as she never truly was. Those two were in cahoots, Chloe was sure of it, and that made her feel hella uncomfortable to the point that she got angry at herself. Fuck, goddamnit.

“Alright.” She said finally and then waved with a piece of paper in her hand. “A special envelope landed today delivered by a golden…”

Rachel’s eyes grew bigger as she jumped to her girl trying to reach the letter. It took her only a second to notice the famous red seal at the top left of the envelope, making her excited, scared, sick to her stomach and forgetting about Max’s silent presence altogether. Harvard. Harvard got back to her. Finally! After months for fucking waiting!

“Holy shit! Give me that!” The envelope disappeared in the air as Chloe took advantage of her height not willing to give up the precious note. “Give me that, you asshole!”

She got pulled closer for a long, deep and passionate kiss. The kind of kiss that was hardly shared in public, but somebody really wanted to show their ownership. Jesus, Chloe, really, she thought but tried to use the situation as leverage and yank out the precious note. The pirate predicted the trick and avoided it swiftly biting her girl’s lip instead. It was so wrong to demonstrate the affection in front of her childhood friend, but somehow Chloe Price wanted to show off. Rachel was hers, only hers and fuck, jealousy was stupid, this was so stupid, so she kissed her wife again. Poor Max was watching this spectacle with a weird, sad smirk on her face and then got back to staring at the photos.

“Nope.” Chloe laughed, seeing how Rachel was still trying to find a way to get this piece of paper in her hands. Even tickling didn’t help though. “You, me, the beach tonight and celebration. And I’m driving! Then maybe I’ll let you open this thing. No, I said later.” The pirate hissed avoiding another attack and took a step back, squeezing the envelope in one the jacket’s many pockets. It was a piece of the future she wanted to uncover in more intimate circumstances, or that was her official justification. Unofficially she still felt a bit off.

“You’re terrible.” Her wife looked at her with huge disappointment. “Why are you punishing me?”

“Punishing? I haven’t even started. I need something to bribe you later.” Her blonde angel melted under one more kiss. “Besides, we all know what’s inside, don’t we? It’s not like a surprise like in my case.” It was damn awful not allowing Rachel to read it right away but felt somehow necessary. Stupid. Awful. Still right. Seeing her wife upset was heartbreaking though. Enjoying a bitter taste of the victory, Chloe turned to her friend. “Max, are you coming?”

“Yeah, I’m coming.” The little freckle stood up and followed her friend to the door. “Good luck tonight.” She said before disappearing in the hallway.

Rachel felt dumb. A make-out session and cheerful fight over a happy message had to be so terrible for Max to see. That was it when it came to making the little freckle feel better. Hoping they would have a chance to talk for real pretty soon, Rachel found wording the right goodbye difficult. Before she could put her response together, both girls were gone.

“Good luck… all the time.” She said to the closed door.

***

“With all due respect, I really don’t think it’s really helping Nathan.” Kris crossed her arms on her
chest and ignored the commotion of rushed preparations. He tried to show her how busy he really was, but she didn’t care, following him around with this annoying attitude filled with demand and fake power and not willing to hold this meeting anywhere else. Avoiding Sean Prescott’s daughter hit its critical point, and she wouldn’t allow him to postpone this conversation any longer.

She stood by his side when he packed his camera. She sighed impatiently when he was folding the light stands and didn’t even offer her help when he tried to untangle the cables. Usually, a student would be delegated to assist the teacher, but Mark Jefferson decided it was better to show himself as extremely hectic to scare this woman away. He wasn’t packing the whole equipment just for kicks though. The photo session for the drama crew was about to take place in the old Arcadia Bay theatre, so he had a legit reason to send her away, excusing himself with the preparations, but no vindications worked, since Kris couldn’t care less. With a snap of her fingers she was in command to reschedule this event, invoking the oldest and most powerful argument - money. Her family owned the school and she could do what she pleased and now her only and ultimate goal was to give him a lecture. Reprimand him! Him!

Mean slut, just like all of them.

“I respect your opinion, but he made huge progress.” Mark Jefferson zipped the lenses bag and turned back to her, producing a careful but understanding smile. “The art can be therapeutic…”

“It can be, but it will never be enough.” Kris cut him off sharply. She heard all about his supposed accomplishments, read all the great reviews and talked to people who praised him but nothing of it impressed her. Guys like him could charm some Blackwell cheerleaders, talking smoothly to the faculty or brag about their new publications, but in her book, it was more exasperating and ostentatious that remarkable. “Not in his case. Nathan has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and this diagnosis was confirmed by numerous specialists all over the country and a few in Canada. He should be on meds for the rest of his life for his own good. I’m grateful he has somebody mature to talk to, but the photo contest is not an equivalent of a professional treatment. I’m sorry, Mr. Jefferson, but your form of therapy won’t help him much. Not as the only solution.” She pointed at him like he was the one to blame for her brother’s state.

Bitch.

It would feel so good to tighten his hands around her neck and watch this annoying, knowing smirk be replaced with fear and panic. To see her fighting for every breath, every gasp of air and slowly giving up, transforming, changing, disappearing. Perhaps she would try to beg, maybe she would take it with a remaining glimpse of dignity, letting him win. He was always winning though. Always. Thinking about it didn't help though, on the contrary. Knowing that she was one of the ones that were untouchable, Jefferson almost dropped his laptop, hardly finding the strength to contain himself. Demands. This girl came here to tell him what to do. She dared to question his authority and experience, forcing her way and opinions instead. Every reasonable person would back off or at least understand he was not in the mood for arguing, but not this… thing. Not even worth becoming an object she looked at him like an owner scrutinizing their dog, calling for apologies or ludicrous, barked promises. Mark Jefferson straightened up, tossing the MacBook bag on the table with a loud clang and wishing that this meeting was taking place in the steel walls of the darkroom, not the public classroom. A place where he could break her, demolish her mind and body for good. It took him a moment to calm down and focus, as the act he was putting on wasn’t easy to maintain. Especially now.

“Like I said, I understand your stance, and I’m very grateful that somebody actually took Nathan’s fate in their hands.” He explained patiently. The years of training how to hide his real intentions paid off. “I’m only his teacher though, somebody who can provide solace through an artistic…”
Kris only shook her head, walking around the classroom, not even taking a second look at his best work. She did her research though. This guy was a scam.

“You have a moral responsibility to convince him to accept the right solution, which means seeing a professional on a weekly basis and taking his meds.” Raising her hand, she didn’t let him finish. Again. “As his teacher and as his friend, or somebody who takes care of him. I know my father invested a lot in your personal career and invited you here hoping to improve Nathan’s chances of becoming a professional photographer, but we both know my brother won’t have any career at all if he won’t get stabilized.”

Mark Jefferson looked at her for a long while, chewing at the words that couldn’t be said. Nathan was quite a troublemaker lately, mentioning his imaginary brother, crying, breaking down and babbling about rifles, bullets, and Rachel Amber. The next step in his transition became mandatory but required the whole set of preparations that Mark couldn’t afford right now. Kris Prescott getting into their business was yet another obstacle, but not so insignificant. He had to play it right, otherwise the whole operation might be in trouble.

Trouble he didn’t need.

“He is stable.” Fighting the urge to just leave slamming the door, he tried his nice and kind smile one more time. “Nathan might act bizarre, but the project we work on together is really changing him. You might not entirely understand how important it is, but…”

Kris scoffed. A photography teacher questioning her ability to appreciate his ways was more than insulting. There was nothing to appreciate though. It would be nice to fire him here and now, but Nathan was so mentally unhinged lately that it was better to just force him to cooperate. Famous or not, this guy couldn’t understand basic mental hygiene and the need for professional treatment. In her book, Jefferson just placed himself between a dangerous lunatic and a pretentious asshole. A waste of time.

“Please, cut the crap.” Tired of his constant detours and pathetic tricks, she decided to play it all card-up. “I’m not a high school hippie, and this smooth talk about high art won’t impress me. I expect you to do the right thing and I will carefully watch how it advances. You can influence him and if you don’t, well…” She smirked and shrugged not stopping her stroll.

Mark Jefferson got a bit pale.

“Is that a threat?”

Kris stopped and looked at him through half-narrowed eyes.

“The Prescotts don’t threaten people, Mr. Jefferson. We buy them.” She specified gently. “Or put them on sale.”

Nathan’s favorite teacher moved nervously trying to hide his irritation and bulging anger. She knew guys like him, who always had to be in control of every facet of their lives and used all the tricks and shortcuts to achieve it. Breaking those men was one of the very few aspects of life she fully enjoyed. For a second or two Kris was fostering a hope that Jefferson would drop the act and respond honestly or maybe even start yelling. Unfortunately, this guy couldn’t even force himself to show his real face, too consumed by his carefully crafted image or too scared to quarrel openly. Courageous and brave artist her ass. Their valor ended when the money flowed, regardless of creative achievements. Apparently, a stable and generous income provided by Blackwell Academy, including a nice apartment and luxurious car was something Mark Jefferson was quite afraid to lose. Kris
looked into his employment history and apparently, he was relying more on her father’s finances than he would like to admit. The high fashion industry wouldn’t welcome him back with open arms since the gossips about his dark and weird tastes were circling widely among people who had worked with him, and his reputation had given him more enemies than friends, if any. Accused of treating the models horribly, he was infamous for losing his patience in the worst possible manner or exploiting people like objects just to take the shot. Unfortunately for him, since then a lot of unknown artists made names for themselves and wouldn’t mind starting hell if he reappeared on the artistic stage of Seattle or anywhere else. Yes, he was respected for his dark noir style and hit the history books with a few of his photos, but it was a short-lived craze, not so popular anymore. Overall, Mark Jefferson, despite his stories and self-proclaimed status of a celebrity, was done and had nothing to come back to.

He wasn’t doing Blackwell a favor. The school and her family were saving his ass.

Mark Jefferson was watching her very carefully as if calculating all the pros and cons of the situation. She finally got all of his attention. Trying to hide her victorious grin, Kris turned away finally understanding what her father was talking about when mentioning cornering people. Sean Prescott was doing it for all the wrong reasons though, but the apple didn’t fall far from the tree in this case.

She got him.

“Not everything is for sale,” Jefferson responded slowly, like contemplating another move or rearranging his plans. Something in his voice warned her not to say anything more, but the admonition got ignored.

“Oh, it is. Everything is.” Kris said back with pure satisfaction. “Otherwise why would you even move here?”

***

“Mrs. Grant? You wanted to see me?” Hesitant as always, Chloe Price walked in, without knocking and then took a step back, trying to fix her mistake. Her teacher, even if nice and kinda cool, could get super livid if disturbed during some critical task, like checking the tests or drinking hot tea for example. Fortunately, not engaged in anything particularly noteworthy, Mrs. Grant was indeed treating herself with some warm beverage and rubbing her hands viciously, since the chem lab got even colder than Chloe remembered from class. The heater system really didn’t work well in the whole school, and the fact that the weather punished everybody equally was somehow helpful. It meant it would be fixed soon.

“Yes, Chloe, please come in.” Mrs. Grant gestured at her asking to come closer. “No, no, take a seat. I would like to have a word with you.”

The blue pirate politely sat down in front of the big and messy desk, not sure what to expect. Her teachers weren’t known for engaging in random chitchat and if they really wanted to talk it usually meant trouble. Chloe could smell a problem from miles away but couldn’t recall a single thing that would bring her into the position she had been trying to avoid for months.

“If this is about the last homework, I’m really sorry.” She blurted out thinking about the only one thing that could go wrong. If she calculated something wrong, it was Rachel’s fault anyway. Not that
her wife had really done something, usually giving her time and space when duty called but was guilty just by the fact that she existed. “I was a bit distracted and…”

Mrs. Grant chuckled, and that made Chloe blush as if her teacher knew exactly what was going through the pirate’s head. Well, she could only hope it wouldn’t be another of those annoying lectures on how hard it was to manage being married and studying. She and Rachel went through a decent amount of those, usually embarrassed as hell, since the members of the faculty decided to share their personal stories and advice, trying to balance between showing their support for a relationship and serious counsel on how important it was to graduate. Chloe really hoped they had passed that stage since she got to college and shit, but apparently, it wasn’t enough.

She sighed.

“Your homework was great, as always.” Mrs. Grant shook her head, this time guessing the blue thoughts correctly. “It’s not what I wanted to talk about. Did you hear about next month’s trip?”

Scratching her neck, Chloe wondered for a second. The chair squeaked when she finally recalled the announced event and moved apprehensively. Oh great, that was probably worse than the marriage advice.

“To Boston?” She murmured, knowing where it was going. “Yeah, I was told.”

“I would really like you to come. I have an old friend teaching at MIT, and I would love for you to meet him before your first semester starts. Not to mention you could take a look around campus and search for a place to stay. It’s a great opportunity for the new students to network and learn more about the academic environment.”

Chloe nodded looking at her fingertips and then playing with her textbook pages. The rustle of the paper echoed in an uncomfortable noise, bouncing the annoying sound between the glass test-tubes, microscopes, plastic containers and other junk supposedly helpful with learning stuff. The blue pirate loved the experiments, but at the end of the day, the carefully written passages and formulas were making the difference, teaching her a thing or two through numbers and methods, recipes and blueprints. It would be great to go to Boston and check it out, experience and experiment, but the balance of her bank account, the fucking written numbers were saying otherwise.

“I… I don’t know… It’s a bit expensive.” She said shyly, always uncomfortable when talking about money. They were like really broke now, and she couldn’t even ask Joyce or David for a loan. The cars didn’t sell during winter as everybody was out of funds after the holidays and her own family, even with the help from Rachel, spent a lot during Christmas. Her wife, even if supported financially by her loaded daddy, already used all her money to pay for this drama club event she was about to go to next month. Knowing her girl, Chloe knew that if she asked, Rachel would make it happen, even if it meant calling James Amber, but that solution was humiliating, and no trip to Boston was worth it. Not to mention the blue rebel hated asking others for cash, even her own family and even for something important. The only person from whom she ever borrowed some cash was Frank the asshole, and even a glimpse of a memory of how the debt had been paid was making her furious.

“I’m sure the school board could come up with something.” She heard Mrs. Grant suggesting quietly.

Chloe didn’t say much for a second staring at the desk and still scratching the textbook. Knowing she had to refuse, she just wanted to pretend it was a well-thought out decision. Mrs. Grant really wanted to do some good deed and shit so it would be unfair to just reject her help in some nasty, violent manner. Chloe would really like to go though, especially since Max signed up for the trip as well, as the class photographer or whoever else, since she really wanted to take a break from Blackwell and
Seattle wasn’t as convivial. It would be dope to snoop around with her old friend, visit new places and even miss Rachel a lot, however it wasn’t possible. Not now.

“Yeah, I’m sure they could, but I would rather not ask for it.” She answered feeling worse with every sentence spoken. “Thank you though, it’s very generous, it’s just… not really my style.”

Chloe peered at Mrs. Grant hoping that she wouldn’t be pressured more, but her teacher understood. She got more than the blue pirate thought though, still remembering a hard time from her own youth, when every dollar, every cent was a burden and asking others was making her feel like a beggar. To be honest, Mrs. Grant considered even playing for Chloe Price’s trip, but she knew it would never be accepted. This kid really wanted to do everything by herself, even if sometimes it wasn’t a good idea.

Well, she would learn in time.

“Promise me one thing, Chloe, that you will think about it.” Nodding, the teacher let her get up finishing the conversation. She didn’t expect much more from this proud rebel and appreciated the attitude, but it was hard to see the struggle and not able to do anything about it. “Chloe…” The blue-haired girl turned around hearing her name. “I’m proud of you. I have to admit, I almost lost faith in you when you dropped out and then got expelled. I didn’t think you would ever come back and now… just look at you. An MIT student!” Taking off her glasses, Mrs. Grant shook her head again, still flabbergasted by Chloe’s extraordinary transformation. “One of the very first in my career! You achieved so much in the last few months. You’re a very, very surprising person.”

The blue-haired kid’s face lit up in a broad, happy smile, warming the whole room way more than hot tea. Apparently, she didn’t hear the praise often even if she deserved every bit of it.

“Yeah, my wife says the same. Thank you, Mrs. Grant.”

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Victoria Chase growled in disappointment and then looked at her phone, scrolling through the messages, notes, and numbers. Apparently, no one was able to get things done without her, and even something so mundane a task as fixing some heating pipes needed her intervention. She had a script to learn and a photo shoot to do, but of course, no one came forward to help her with a more urgent issue. Dana, Taylor, or even Courtney were useless, asking Samuel when it would be done and proudly bringing the answer ‘soon.’ Rachel seemed immune to the cold, probably warming herself up with her vain glory or some dyke activities and the Bigfoot team just shrugged, rushing to another football training. Usually, she would just call Nathan and ask him for help or demand action, but Victoria preferred to forget his existence. Her former friend didn’t speak to her since the holidays, and she would prefer to keep it that way.

Well, great. She had to do it herself. As always.

The loud rumble below her feet gave Victoria some hope that at least a few people remembered how to do their jobs. If the heating wasn’t fixed in the next fifteen minutes, she would make sure that this neglect would have severe consequences. She really should prepare for the meeting in the old theatre and wanted to make a good impression on Mark. Her teacher, who became weirdly friendly with Rachel, could really help with her future career and she wouldn’t miss this chance, hoping to catch
his eye during the session. Of course, Chloe’s wife would try to steal the spotlight, but Victoria had a few tricks up her sleeve and couldn’t wait to put them in play.

Walking through the hallway, she noticed Max Caufield, who curled up by her locker trying to either become invisible or change into a gray cotton ball, protecting herself from the cold. At least one person was suffering from this freaking weather as much as she was. Seeing the little freckle in such a miserable state almost made Victoria walk to her and chat a bit, but then she noticed something way more intriguing that made her forget about Max Caufield in a second.

Freaking Kris Prescott and damn Steph Gingrich were hiding by the door to the staircase, smiling, laughing, whispering and kissing. Not aware that they were watched, Nathan’s sister decided to go full gay with one of Blackwell’s students and even if somehow secretive, was making a spectacle of herself. That information was worth freezing her ass off, and Victoria decided that such a tender moment should be immortalized through the eye of her camera, but then remembered about Max who curled up, even more, trying not to look at the girls and being perfectly aware of what was going on. The fun part was that the lovely couple still thought that they were alone and not spotted by anyone.

Good old high school chess. Victoria had missed playing it, to be frank, and this one snapshot would make the end of January way more interesting.

The perfect aim of the camera got disturbed, she got bumped by Chloe Price herself, who just stormed out of the classroom and seeing those two also froze in place. The blue pirate, who was quite busy lately, scarcely having time to start a conversation or even shoot an insult, looked as stunned as everybody else. Victoria glared at her hoping for insight, but Price was just standing there with her eyes bulging not responsive at all. How this crazy asshole was about to study at a prestigious college was beyond the Blackwell queen, although Chloe didn’t get snooty with her MIT future, like her Amber wife who shoveled the Harvard logo down everybody’s throat. To her surprise, Chloe seemed uninformed of the new gay representation that included one of her supposed friends.

Interesting indeed.

“Did you know about that?” Victoria asked, but Chloe just sniffled looking at the couple, then at the Blackwell queen with the phone in her hand and except a few croons and murmurs, couldn’t produce a coherent response.

“Sort of,” she articulated finally, sniffling and not sure what to do with herself or with the unexpected company. The last thing she needed today was dwelling on her friends’ private life with Victoria Chase, even if the fashion snake was acting semi-decently and wasn’t causing that much of a stir. Then Chloe groaned desperately noticing Caufield. The little freckle still tried to be as invisible as the couple, shielding herself with the locker’s metal door and a huge photo album.

The blue rebel stepped up wanting to walk to her, say something, or just simply take her away from here, but the little freckle just shook her head, raising her hands and walked off, heading to the bathroom. Still torn if she should run after her friend, rush to the parking lot to meet Rachel, or have a word or two with those two, Chloe stayed in place, nervously scratching her textbook. It was hard to observe how things were changing, and she had no idea how to react, feeling caged between a rock and a hard place. Yelling at Steph seemed a bit dramatic, curse the fuck out of Kris outlandish and assuring Max that everything would be fine merely stupid. Fortunately, she had her own schedule to stick to, so she just ran to the exit hoping to solve this issue later, hopefully with Rachel.

The pipes below thundered, choked; the whole building coughed, and something started to work, filling the corridor with light, a metallic buzz and a copper and brass promise of potential warmth.
Steph and Kris didn’t sense the whole commotion and the attention they got but noticed the sudden noise, jumping off of each other pretending to be occupied by nothing more than an innocent conversation. Their body language was betraying them anyway, but at least it wasn’t explicitly intimate. Victoria frowned in disappointment missing the opportunity to make their secret a little bit more public, or at least to own a solid proof that it was indeed happening. Well, with that kind of attitude it was a matter of time for everybody to know anyway, but at least she could prepare, already working on the right angle. Kris seemed a bit too familiar with the DND girl though, they had to have some kind of history and the Blackwell queen couldn’t wait to learn more about it. Passing them, she pretended that she didn’t witness anything concerning, enjoying the fact that the heater started working and she had at least one less task to worry about.

“All damn time,” Victoria said to herself, heading to the dorms, enjoying the sweet taste of fresh information and wondering how to use it correctly.

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“I’ve seen them today,” Chloe said when their hands laced in a tight grasp, and they started to saunter through an empty beach. “Again.”

“Steph and Kris?” Rachel snuggled into the blue arms more. Hand holding wasn’t enough while facing the cold darkness so thick that the line between the shore and slowly moving waves was almost invisible. They stuck close to the promenade entrance though, sensing that this walk, even if romantic and all, wouldn’t last long. The night sky was so cloudy that not a single star was blinking at them, so they wandered through the wet sand hardly seeing their own feet.

Where was a lighthouse when they needed one?

“Yeah.” The blue pirate nodded holding her angel closer and trying to protect Rachel from the wild gust of wind. “Giving each other mouth to mouth respiration or whatever bullshit they prefer to sell us. Fun fact, they think that no one knows or notices.” Getting into somebody’s business wasn’t something that Chloe Price took lightly, usually avoiding those kinds of situations or, if it happened, not babble about it further. Today, seeing Max hiding between the lockers and those two on the other side of the corridor, she almost imploded and now needed some decent advice from her wife, who once held the title of the most popular girl in Blackwell. This popularity shit didn’t really change much though, becoming just less official. The knowledge from the old times hopefully remained.

“All thoughts? You know, as you know that social shit and stuff?”

Rachel looked withdrawn though, not speaking much since they had met at Liberty Theatre’s parking lot. Drowning in her own thoughts, she seemed upset and somehow damaged, not sharing a single thing about the photo session for the promo posters. That was worrying enough since it was a big deal for the whole drama club to finally occupy the famous Arcadia Bay stage and she couldn’t shut up about it for over two weeks straight. Not to mention that the whole thing was organized by Mark Jefferson himself, but Rachel stayed quiet like she had gone through a torture ring, not a modeling experience.

What the hell?

The blue pirate got scared for a moment that her girl discovered her little secret about David and the truck, but calmed down instantly, assuming she would already hear a thing or two about dishonesty and lying in general. Their meeting today was brief though and didn’t bring any breaking news either, except what they had known before. Her step-father officially stated that somebody might try
to hunt them down and asked directly if Chloe was in trouble. Again. When she denied, he delved deeper about this Frank person and everything else he heard about. The blue rebel wriggled out of this conversation but was sure that David wouldn’t put this case to rest and keep digging. Uh, she would have to put some story together to shut him up, but not today.

“Chloe Price, getting into gossip?” Rachel finally spoke up, still questionably quiet. Her voice was so low that it almost drowned within the sound of crashing waves. “I wasn’t aware of this particular interest of yours.”

“Fuck you. Hard. Later.” Cracking a joke didn’t help. No smile, no punch, no teasing response. Worried, Chloe lurked at her wife, even more confused. Max and her situation were kinda urgent though, so she kept on going. “I’m just… I don’t know… Nervous? Uncomfortable? They still pretend they are buddies with no benefits. It’s just weird, you know? I don’t know what to do around them. Like…” Even simple greeting became a mountain when it came to Kris and Steph. Pretending that everything was okay would be a big lie and attacking them instead was kinda overkill and stupid. Both of them were technically single, so they could open a fuck depot as far as Chloe was concerned, knowing for a fact that you couldn’t control who you fell for. The fact that Steph was Max’s ex complicated everything though and the blue rebel, feeling more blue than rebellious, would really appreciate any solid insight or thoughtful guidance.

“I know.” Rachel said after a while. Her voice was sharp, tired and a bit hoarse like she was crying before or suffered from a sore throat. “They can’t sugarcoat this issue forever and lie to everybody’s face. If they ain’t gonna make any kind of statement, I will.” Catching Chloe’s surprised gaze, she shrugged in a somewhat aggressive manner. “I’m done with walking on eggshells especially that Steph is our friend too. Whatever it is between them it should be official for Max’s sake as well.” It was better to kill off the hope that giving the poor freckle any clues that she still had chances. “This hiding in the corners is fucking childish if you ask me.” She finished, getting back to hand-holding only, still shivering from cold and putting the collar of her coat up.

The way her angel was acted concerned Chloe though. She seemed so tired and reserved like she hadn’t been in months, barking, hissing and sort of overreacting. Confronting Kris and Steph wasn’t something that the blue pirate considered, and it felt a bit rude and out of place. Everybody had the right to come out, gay or not, as they pleased, especially Kris, whose situation was also pretty complicated. Sending Prescott’s daughter back to Brazil would be just mean and unnecessary, however it would be a stretch to assume that Steph's new semi-girlfriend had to deal with the banishment again. Anyhow, outing them wouldn’t help Max at all, or so the blue pirate assumed. Chloe had expected more personal advice though, not a declaration of vicious revenge. Or war.

“Yeah. Well, we did it too.” She sniffled. “For years.”

Rachel stopped her walk, turning to her and still subsiding in the deep, gaping sand. Her eyes seemed so dark, with no source of light to wake up the hazel and golden spots. Chloe immediately regretted this whole beach idea. Even if their bank account was suffering significantly trying to multiply its contents by zero, they should’ve really spent this day in some nice, warm and cozy restaurant instead. Everything about this dark coast adventure seemed off from the start, including the eerie silence in the car.

“But we stopped hiding,” Rachel stated. “I stopped. You know why? Because I wanted it to be fucking serious with no way back. I wanted you to be mine, and nothing else mattered, including all the…”

“Ex-girlfriends?” Another crack of a joke that left Chloe uneasy and made her girl scoff.

“Funny.” Poking the jacket, Rachel remembered about the stashed envelope waited to be opened
tonight. Somehow, she would prefer to postpone it, but it would be hard to explain to Chloe why she didn’t want to hear the news, especially good news right away. Her blue treasure would start digging, asking questions and forcing her to tell what was wrong. The problem was that she wasn’t sure. Just everything and nothing. “Including what everybody else thought about it. And, regarding today’s celebration, we both took extreme measures to secure it.” She touched Chloe’s wedding band, recalling how it got created. The skin started to eat the festive colors, obscure the shape and making it blurry. Tattoos were tricky, asking for a renewal quite quickly. Not like the marriage vows.

“Marriage is not that extreme.” Before touching Rachel’s face, Chloe warmed her hand with her breath. “It’s actually nice. Very nice.” She said shyly, brushing her cheek.

That woke up the very first smile this evening. Rachel took a deep breath, finally relaxing a bit, keeping the blue palm in place. The experience she had gone through in the old theatre really shook and messed her up. It felt good to know there was something she could take for granted. More or less.

“So, you’re not pissed off that you can’t call me by my last name anymore?” Snuggling, Rachel murmured to the blue neck, and Chloe, of course, took advantage of it and closed her in her arms again. Addicted to holding her angel close she squeezed her a bit too firm but didn’t get pushed or poked. Well, that was concerning. The blue smile against the blonde hair got a little weaker, wondering what indeed had occurred this afternoon. Who hurt her? Who was she supposed to murder now? It was probably just a bad day though, not a big deal, so Chloe decided to save the night with a cuddle. It was always brighter to stand so close in the middle of fucking nowhere, even if they would have to change into freaking bats to find the way back to the car, and the dark clouds buried the beauty of the starry sky. A view that Chloe secretly hoped for tonight.

“Of course, I can, Price.” She whispered although Rachel didn’t even respond to this inside joke much. Usually, she would start to argue or simply laugh loudly. This time nothing. Chloe sighed. “So, how did it go with Jefferson tonight? What did you guys talk about?”

The response didn’t come immediately like Rachel really pondered what to say. Still vexed and disordered, she hugged Chloe closer, breathing in her smell and closing her eyes. It was soothing to hear the blue hear pulsating in the standard, steady rhythm, with no rush or exasperation.

“Theatre.” She replied, and seeing Chloe surprised once more, Rachel winced sadly. “What? He’s pretty knowledgeable when it comes to it. Since I can’t bore you with details about the longest and the gloomiest of Shakespeare’s plays, I had to find somebody else to vent to.” Scratching one of the old stitches, so dark that it looked like an old scar or blemish, she noticed how much she loved this old leather jacket. Chloe had to freeze in it since it wasn’t really warm though, but it felt and smelled like home. Like safety.

“C’mon Rach, cut me some slack. What is this play about?” Her angel seemed doubtful though. Chloe rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I really want to know. Who are you gonna play?”

It took Rachel so long to respond that the blue pirate almost lost her hope that it would ever happen. She wasn’t that great when it came to literature and would understand laughing off her request, but there was something more to it. Something darker and way more worrying. Rachel took a deep breath, took a step back.

“An old guy who lost everything.” She said and dragged her towards the parked car, done with the cold, gloomy coast.
The afternoon was still young, and the dim, gray sky didn’t start to cover itself with the coat of sunset, but the maze of backstage dressing rooms, hallways, staircases, and hidden closets remained pitch dark despite the time and season. Soaking in the mysterious atmosphere of the secret passages was always exciting for Rachel, as every fiber of her being was awaiting the great surprise, even if there was no premiere or spectacle planned. Walking through the foyers, she recalled when her parents had taken her to a theater for the very first time, and she got smitten by the dusty, dark drapes of the corridors as much as with the magic of the actual performance. This feeling never got old, as she found herself nervous and thrilled, taking her seat at center stage getting ready for the photos to be taken. Mark Jefferson, already prepared, waited patiently as her makeup got adjusted and the fake, roman armor got cleaned up from smudges and smears.

The costume was indeed impressive, made by Diane Steward, who had been working in the Liberty Theatre in Arcadia Bay forever, and was ecstatic to prepare the professional setting for the Blackwell play. She did a spectacular job with every costume, also helping the students to build the stage decorations, props and managing the lighting. Usually, the drama club crew would do everything by themselves, but this time Mr. Keaton really wanted to impress the audience or, most likely, tried to help financially one of the oldest auditoriums in Oregon, now mostly visited by ghost hunters than an actual audience. Sadly, this beautiful venue felt almost abandoned, forgotten by the city officials and neglected by sponsors. Blackwell Academy stepped in, giving the students the opportunity to explore the taste of a real stage and promising to chip in for a roof renovation, and maybe even for a new main gate. Rachel sensed that Kris Prescott might have something to do with this decision, but didn’t want to ask directly, wondering whether it was just a nice gesture or some unexpected gift for Steph, who always wanted to manage the stage here.

Girls and expensive gifts always came together, and Rachel smirked to herself thinking about some surprises in the making for the certain blue pirate to honor Valentine day. Yes, they were broke. Yes, she shouldn’t have, but still, it felt so nice to plan something special.

Diane, who finished fixing her eyeshadows, walked off, being called backstage. Mark Jefferson was already staring at her with unspoken resentment, so Rachel tensed up, ready to face the hungry eye of the camera and not wasting his time any longer. She had never had the opportunity to work with her teacher before, and that experience alone was worth playing the part. They had talked so many times about his job, she heard a lot of stories about how marvelous his directions and skillsets were, and she was really looking forward to experiencing it herself.

“I have to say that I was pleasantly surprised when you decided to take this role.” His statement took her off guard her, so Rachel frowned, not sure if it was a mandatory part of the session or just simple chitchat. “Although it only confirmed my suspicions.” He looked at the light meter, checked the camera settings then smiled in a strange, predatory way. “Taking a step back from something you really enjoyed didn’t seem like your modus operandi.”

Rachel’s eyebrow furrowed. Shouldn’t he put his models at ease? Help her to loosen up?

“I just got back from my early retirement, dusting off my rusty acting skills. Sometimes it’s good to remind myself about the talents I have. I don’t plan to occupy the stage for long though.” She explained nonchalantly. “It’s just this one time.”

Not really missing the stage for months, she didn’t lie much, since Rachel had no plans to return to acting in full force. The more she was preparing and learning for the role though, the more she actually enjoyed it and right now re-discovered that theatre was indeed fun. Like said before, this
feeling never got old.

Mark nodded, walking back and forth, not really looking at her or the staged scene. His ways of dealing with things were always unconventional, and his work wasn’t any different. Alerted, she watched him, wondering where he was going with this.

Jefferson smiled.

The first flash almost blinded her. The dark silhouette of her teacher stepped back, then moved forward, almost kneeling and attacking with a series of shots once again. Flash. Flash. Flash. Rachel gasped, trying to show it wasn’t her first rodeo, although this odd, strange feeling that something was off was becoming heavier. She tried to turn her face in his direction but had no idea where he was standing, locating his presence only through the dull sounds of his steps on the wooden platform. Jefferson, becoming one of the ghosts of Liberty Theatre, circled around her, appearing and vanishing in the short spot of bright light, gesturing quickly if he didn’t like something. Up. Down. Chin up. Higher. Flash. She shook her head and blinked, but still couldn’t see anything but a kaleidoscope of sparks and colors.

Flash.

She guessed his leer more than she saw it.

Flash.

Biting her lip and trying to play the part, Rachel winced not able to remember why she ever wanted to be a model. What a terrible job.

“One time?” She heard his voice still confused by the lights and shadows. “You will always be in the spotlight, Rachel, whether you want it or not.” His voice was calm and kind, however, she felt brought down quickly, cautioned or even reprimanded. Jefferson knew her too well. “‘Titus Andronicus’ is not an easy part. Intriguing, fascinating, challenging, but not easy. I have to say, it’s quite a comeback. And that leads me to yet another question…”

She moved nervously, strangely finding the beam of reflectors repulsive. Smoothing out the red cape, she thought about the times when her stage costumes were made by her mom, in a festive, family atmosphere and with words of encouragement when Rose sewed the stitches, excited about the upcoming performance. She wasn’t the greatest tailor in the world, but everything she created was remarkable anyway and special in its own way. This whole venture was too official for any mother to step in though, marking itself as professional, but less personal or cozy.

Unsafe.

Rachel cleared her throat, missing her mom so much right now. “You like asking me questions.” She responded, suddenly not willing to give him any information about herself whatsoever, wishing to become just one of his students, not a favorite, and to cut this short. Weird feeling. Maybe it was the bright spotlight, perhaps the old, wooden stage, the audience welcoming ghost and shadows more than avid admirers of theatre, or perhaps the fact that she couldn’t move without his permission, not able to even look at him.

“As much as you like to answer them.” Mark shrugged when the eye of the lens tightened with a sudden squeeze, and he reappeared on her right side. Checking the shots, he seemed completely absorbed by work and not paying any attention to the conversation. “It takes two to play this game. What blocks you?”
She opened her mouth and closed it stunned by the direct question. Not expecting such an investigation, Rachel looked around trying to see if they were indeed alone or if it was some kind of thespian game she was unwillingly tested with. It seemed they were indeed on their own since Diane had to take a smoke break and the rest of the cast should appear in an hour or two. Mark wanted to take things slow and apparently quite personal, suddenly changing his song. The tone was still the same, but Rachel noticed the lyrics became more and more aggressive.

Weird. Why now? Was it the magic of the old theatre?

Flash.

“Excuse me?” Trying to focus she changed her position, but he stopped her in half-move, commanding not to twitch, shudder or even wince. Rachel froze as asked, still trying to be this glorious leader, the victorious warrior she was supposed to pretend to be. It was getting more difficult with every shot taken.

And Mark knew it. He enjoyed it.

He wanted his models sore and helpless, reliant on his sharp and hard-hearted directions, shifting to his liking and orders. He loved to slowly break them by a gesture, light, loud snap or a sudden query, throwing off, complicate them and confuse. Most of them cried after, desperately trying to save their dignity, even if trained and used to humiliation, but none of them lasted for long ruining the perfect shot sooner or later. Never asking about the details of his craft, Rachel had no idea how cruel and brutal this experience could be, eating up the fairy tale of this flawless artist who just wanted to get his job done, using all his tricks and wiles. Mark had plenty of them.

Breaking her or at least fracturing during this exact session, was part of his plan from the get-go, but after the confrontation with Kris, Mark Jefferson felt the need to press harder and test her trust. Striving for payback, he wanted to see Rachel isolated and devastated, wrecked by his approach but still not suspecting the worst. He arranged the moment carefully so no one would disturb them, and it was the next very best thing after the cold, steel walls of his private darkroom. Rachel in the darkroom was quite a fantasy, but she was special and tying her up, drugged, and unconscious wasn’t a challenge he was up for. There was something in her that weirdly fascinated Mark and he was determined to discover what she hid from him deep down and who she really was.

There were different levels of transformation and control. He took over her life, winning her trust and knowing that this girl, even if quite smart, put all the faith in him. It was captivating and disgusting at the same time, he wanted to know more, and the best way to learn about people was to simply take a photo. Capture them.

Flash.

Rachel was special, she wanted to be special, and Jefferson needed to corner her, squeeze like a lemon using his favorite way of them all – slicing time. Butchering her universe to small pieces of stagnant moments and changing them into painful seconds he could collect and storage, deciding which part of it would remain and which was just garbage. So far, Rachel was doing great, and he wanted more.

Flash.

More.
“You rejected the limelight, stepping out of the stage avoiding any kind of attention that put you in the center.” He came closer then walked away, turned right and circled. Feeling like easy prey, Rachel curled up but was immediately ordered to sit back erect. “Moreover, you decided to proudly lead life on the outskirts of society, denying every aspect of your former popularity.” Lifting his camera, Mark finally looked straight into her blinded eyes. “Why?”

Flash.

So small on the vast stage, surrounded by the echo of the auditorium, she looked so confused and lost, almost betrayed by his attitude, relying on the simple, useless promise of real, true friendship. Naïve, like the rest of them, Rachel could feel that she was indeed examined and ensnared, but unlike any other, she was doing it willingly and remained still. Brave and stupid. Because of so many previous conversations, words and confessions, she felt obligated to be here and hoped to learn from it or understand more. Good. He wanted to keep her curious and hungry. It would work better.

“Being gay doesn’t equal being an outcast.” She attacked blindly.

Mark just scoffed. What a cheap excuse.

“We both know it’s not about being gay.” Changing the card in his camera, he lurked at her sensing how grateful Rachel was for this short break. Mercy was always working better than a threat. The wooden panels whined under his shoes when he kneeled and got back to work. “This part actually helped you to rig the game to your favor. Nothing sells better than a bit of nonchalant controversy and high school is all about discovering sexuality and experimenting.” Flash. “You can try to be a social delinquent as much as you want, but you will never be one.” Flash. “People love you even more for your courage and standing your ground, being openly in a relationship and working hard to regain your status. You are a natural born star, Rachel, and the crowd will follow you everywhere you go. Yet, something is blocking you, forcing you to stay in the shadows.” Pausing, Mark tilted his head, selling the brutal honesty with a gentle smirk. “What is it?”

When he had seen Rachel for the first time, it didn’t take long to understand that she was indeed a human chameleon, melting into every crowd and situation easily, latently painting herself in the right tints and shades. Every chameleon before the change had to see the color to adjust itself though, and the only way to prevent this transformation was to keep it confused. A simple lack of any color would do the job.

Mark snapped the shutter button again.

Flash.

White, so much white. Somewhat aware of what he was talking about, Rachel frantically tried to find the right answer, not only to please him but for herself as well. The dreams about fame and the whole world bending to her will had gotten ditched a long time ago, and it was hard to acknowledge all the reasons at once. Drugs, Frank, the thing he had done, the issues about Sera, but Mark knew all about them or at least heard the mildest, trivial version since she wasn’t able to open up fully. Telling her teacher about all the things she had gone through was out of the question, not because Rachel didn’t trust him, but it was hard to even recall them. She didn’t want to.

Flash.

“What is it?” He repeated.

Pressured, she could think only about one explanation she remembered. A simple answer that was so trifling that would seem like a joke but was so painfully true. She swallowed her ambitions not only
because she had to, but only a simple normal life would let her be with a person who she truly loved.

Flash.

“Chloe…” She stated and bit her tongue, feeling bad even thinking that way and blaming her blue treasure for the forgotten dreams and desires. Fighting for this relationship forced her to change her whole life and damn, she succeeded. Closing her eyes for a second, she recalled Chloe’s smile this morning, her palm on her cheek and the first, long, loving kiss that she had woken up to. Her girl was her whole world, literally or not, but Mark was right. The hunger for more was still there, just changed, twisted, transformed into a different color.

She couldn’t even name this color anymore.

Flash.

“Chloe loved you for years and was by your side through thick and thin. She wouldn’t care if you chose to shine.” Rachel heard him walking to the other side. Flash. The old, dusty curtains waved, stirred by his turn. “Perhaps she’s waiting for it just like the rest of your friends and people who look up to you.”

“She’s very possessive…” It sounded even worse, like a freaking betrayal. Wishing Chloe to be here, Rachel was damn grateful that her girl wasn’t able to hear it. That wasn’t what she had in mind anyway, she just didn’t know how to express herself, how to say it.

Cheap excuse.

“So, do you want to say that your wife is pulling in your reins?” He paused, now entirely focusing on her answer and not even trying to take another shot. The lights got less, or her eyes got used to them. Finally being able to see his face, she took a deep breath.

“No, it’s not like that.” Rachel gestured quickly, feverishly trying to explain. Feeling so damn guilty she desperately needed to turn the tables, forgetting what she said previously and hoping that Mark wouldn’t remember as well. He would though. He would use it against her in another heated discussion. Fuck it. “Chloe would accept me and support me, but I just don’t want this… this…” She stuttered, not able to finish the sentence, sick to her stomach and disoriented by the bright light even more.

“Why?” Flash.

“I just don’t think it’s worth it…”

“Why?” He almost yelled. Flash.

Flash. Flash.

“Because it hurts!” She yelled back standing up and throwing off the red, long cloak. Not victorious or glorious, in fake Roman armor that made her more exposed than shielded, Rachel reached her limit. Almost bursting into tears and driven up the wall she tightened her fists, trying to save her face. “Because it makes me lonely, miserable and forces me to do stupid things! It makes me a monster that I don’t want to be! Because I feel like a puppet! A puppet that my father…” She waved it off. No, no this thing. She couldn’t say it. “The stage and popularity…” Rachel gasped. “Those things are just an illusion, just a fucking dream. I want to live and love for real. Otherwise I…” Swallowing hard, she closed her eyes tightly. “…I just feel numb. I hate it.”

Knowing how kind and caring Mark usually was, she expected him to ask if she was fine or even
suggesting a break, but he said nothing, still crouching between the tripods and cables, hunting for another perfect shot. This heartless approach scared her, although it was somehow understandable. It had to be. Jefferson was a professional and wanted to get his job done. She was just a prop, a piece to his puzzle.

Not a nice feeling.

Nothing was fucking nice anymore.

“You are who you are, Rachel.” His voice was calm, kind, soothing. Mark just wanted her to understand a few things, guide her but it felt like fucking torture. “You want to change, to transform. However, your persistence, even if so strong, is not everything.” He suddenly appeared by her side, reassuring and comforting, offering full support. Feeling his hand on her shoulder, Rachel almost shook it off, but it would be wrong and rude. This condescending was playing on her nerves, and she was damn close to just fucking lose it. Mark was her teacher though. Her friend. Somebody who really cared for her.

She felt like a failure.

“I believe that if you’re motivated enough and work hard, it will repay you.” Rachel dared to look straight in his eyes, hating herself for the sudden outburst. Sitting back, she challenged him with her chin up and a fresh dose of desperation, trying to prove her worth. Just like she dared James Amber a few months back. “It always pays off. Like playing a lead role in a play, taking care of the person you love, having an amazing home or taking photos of the most famous models. Or climbing Mount Everest.” Rachel sniffled. “For example.”

He walked back, preparing for another shot. She sighed, still tense and anxious, hoping for this session to end soon. Apparently, he really wanted to keep this momentum going though. If she didn’t know him better, she would assume that Mark really enjoyed it, as if forcing, pushing and pressing her was more interesting than what he was seeing through his beloved camera.

“I wasn’t aware of this particular ambition of yours.” His amicable attitude seemed too artificial, but she had no other option but to keep up with it. Before she responded, she heard a loud noise backstage, as dozens of feet tortured the vintage staircase with a rapid trout. Rachel exhaled deeply. They weren’t alone anymore. The Blackwell drama club decided to finally stop by and take her place. It meant their little session was almost done.

Thank fucking God.

“It was on my bucket list, but I decided to drop it, changing my taste in challenges.” Rachel said, relaxing slowly and noticing how sweaty her palms had become. “Less snow, more heat.” Referring to Chloe was always giving her strength and built up her confidence. At the moment Rachel would give up the chance to play this role to have her pirate by her side right now, but a sweet memory had to suffice.

“The weather conditions might change, but it’s still climbing.” The flashes became less rapid, slowing down with their whiteness. Jefferson smiled politely and changed the digital card one more time. “One way or another. Interesting fact about Mount Everest is that the top of the mountain is covered with human bodies. Over two hundred people died there and stayed between the icicles and snow forever, serving as peculiar road markers for others who dare to climb the mountain now.”

“I heard about it. Poor souls.”

Somebody almost walked in, but Mark waved them off, demanding more time. A student or
employee obeyed at once, but their time was up regardless. Randomly, Rachel thought about the photos wondering if this conversation helped with the final outcome or ruined the whole effort. Reading her mind, Mark showed her a thumbs up, assuring that everything went just great.

Great.

So, it was just a play, a game she had to be involved with for the sake of art. Just a job, a task, nothing more. He had to do it. Had to.

That thought helped her to calm down. Games. She was used to games. Clever ones, or stupid ones that would let her win or fulfill her wishes. She won Chloe playing one. One round of two truths and a lie and the blue pirate was hers. Well, this and a few other tricks she had up her sleeve even if the poor, confused rebel had no idea where it led. Perhaps Mark knew better, even if Rachel hated people who claimed so. It was fucking cruel. He was her friend, real friend. He would never hurt her if it wasn’t for the greater good.

“Those people didn’t prepare well enough nor had the proper guidance.” Mark Jefferson’s smile was relaxed and composed, just like nothing had happened. “They tried very hard, but it wasn’t sufficient even if their sacrifices serve as a lesson for all of us.”

“A lesson?” Rachel frowned.

Opening his laptop and browsing through the photos, Mark nodded but remained silent, supposedly absorbed by the rows of snapshots. This session was way more fruitful than he previously assumed. Not only did Rachel do a great job, but he learned something more important.

Her real weak point.

Now it was just a matter of time to put it in play, pulling the right strings and uncovering her dark side fully. He knew what to twist to get the effect he wanted, and it was damn fucking hard to hide the excitement. The perspective of another, interesting challenge was quite alluring but not as captivating as the new goal he set for her. Right there, on the dark, old, wooden scene of the half-abandoned empty Arcadia Bay theatre, Mark Jefferson made a decision on what to do with Rachel Price and couldn’t wait to see the outcome.

“All of those poor dead climbers were once very motivated people.” He said slowly, looking at her in this weird, predatory way one more time and then turned off the main light finishing their session. “All of them.”

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“So, there is this guy, Titus.” Rachel started, when they finally sat back in her car and put up the hood covering themselves from the piercing cold. Guessing it wouldn’t be a short story, Chloe was glad they decided to come back. Previously she even considered gathering a few sticks or old papers and to start a campfire. The beach was empty, and no one would notice but playing with sparks and flames would bring too many uncomfortable recollections. The car was better. ”And he’s coming back from a long ass war in glory and splendor.”

“I like when you play splendor. Fits you.” The blue pirate winked and tried to steal a short kiss but didn’t succeed. The red mustang’s inside was always more intimate, making everything more intense, including smells, sounds of rustled leather, nesting in their place and breathing. Sighing, she
turned off the purring radio, willing to focus on the story and hoping that getting into Rachel’s stuff would make her girl happy.

Fuck that Jefferson dude, she could listen as well.

“Thank you, baby.” Rachel snuggled closer, feeling oddly out of place in the passenger’s seat. Chloe won the right to drive today through blackmailing her with the freaking letter. “Anyway, Titus won the whole thing, got welcomed with all the honors and brought some slaves, including the queen of the Goths and her sons. Unfortunately, during his campaign, his friend Caesar, who was running this whole empire, died, and his sons were arguing over who would take over the throne.” There was way more to it, but she decided to stick to the main plot, or describing only the most important events. Summarizing this play could take her the whole night or a few long, painful photo sessions. Rachel trembled trying to forget about the eye of the camera, constant flashes and violent questions, aimed at her at once. Not an easy task though since her memory was as sharp as a razor. The downside of being an actor. Or a lawyer.

Fuck it.

“Lovely.” Chloe groaned remembering why she didn’t get into those stories that much. They were usually so complicated. “Who plays those sons? Victoria?”

“No, she’s playing the enslaved queen.” Rachel said and bit her lip, forgetting the fact that her wife had no idea about the fashion snake being part of the play. Well, she would know soon enough since it would be damn hard to hide Victoria onstage. One secret went down.

Chloe didn’t seem surprised or upset though. It seemed natural for the Blackwell queen to insert herself in any activity that Rachel was involved anyway. Victoria wasn’t a problem anymore, usually surrendering herself with her own, yapping circle and focusing more on Kris Prescott, if anybody.

“Good casting.” She chuckled. “What’s next?”

“So, not to get into details, the people of Rome decided that they don’t want any of Caesar’s sons to be their ruler, and they picked Titus instead. He is a decent person, he has a lovely family, tons of successful campaigns under his belt so it seems fitting.” Rachel finished carefully recalling a long discussion with Mark about this particular part. Painful. Fuck, it was still painful how he treated her. Her tone got lower and she even stuttered a bit, but then condemned herself hoping that Chloe didn’t notice. It was hard to hide anything in this small, thronged setting of a petite sport car.

“It does.” Her pirate agreed.

“And Titus doesn’t really want to. He’s tired of all the fighting and doesn’t really want to engage in any other convoluted shit.”

Pausing, she left the last sentence piercing the warm, cozy silence built up from their breaths, feeling like crying. Tackling this particular issue, explaining why the main character did what he did, seemed radioactive and Rachel really hoped that she wouldn’t have to explain Titus’s motivations that accidentally became so personal. Her blue pirate shrugged though, not really understanding the weight of the message.

It was just a story.

“I can relate.” Nodding, Chloe had no idea that she just won her girl’s heart once again. Out of the blue she got kissed quickly, like she just said or did something right. Actors.

“Me too. Anyway, he supports one of Caesar’s sons to be elected. This son, Saturninus, is an asshole
by the way, but Titus doesn’t give a flying fuck at this point. He just wants to spend time with his
wife and kids. Adult kids, mind you.” She pointed at her pirate. “It’s important. To make everything
fine and dandy, he seals the deal with the new emperor so Saturninus is about to marry Titus’
daughter.”

“Great dad.” Chloe frowned, trying to find her smokes rummaging her pockets. Toxic parenting was
always triggering her in those old plays. “What the fuck, Rachel?”

“I didn’t write it, for crying out loud. I’m just playing the part!” Her wife opened her arms as widely
as the small car let her and then gestured asking for a cigarette herself. They both lit up, sharing the
flame and moving close to each other. Fed with the smoke she continued. “Titus’s sons don’t like
this idea at all, so he kills one them during some kind of… well…” Rachel rolled her eyes. “…
Disagreement.”

Chloe almost choked on a drag of smolder. A family disagreement was defined a bit differently in
her book. Knowing for a fact that those tales were packed with weird twists and turns, she should’ve
expected something like that though. Her desperate cough got welcomed with a burst of laughter. Oh
great, her girl was making fun of her. How nice.

“Oh, jeez.” Chloe gasped, now seriously getting into the story. “Is he nuts?”

“No, not yet.” Rachel calmed her down exhaling a puff of gray cloud herself and filling the inside
with the pungent smoke. “He just tried to follow the law and do what’s right.” Sighing, she tried to
remember that her blue treasure was not fluent in literature and some complex choices might appear
as utterly insane. That was partly why they never discussed it, sticking to their favorite subjects
instead of arguing about drama. The blue effort was apricated though, even if it felt off. Rachel
wasn’t deluging herself to keep Chloe interested for long but really missed those kinds of
conversations, feeling the need to examine and review every single aspect. Her treasure usually
listened, more or less bored, but when it came to written stories, her view was quite black and white.
Good or bad, one-zero. The price of dating, oh damn, being married for exactly three months to a
scientist.

That was partly why she really enjoyed Mark’s company.

“How is killing your own kid good?” The blue pirate didn’t disappoint with her clueless question. If
Rachel had any hopes up about Chloe’s approach, they just died and got buried in the deep ravine of
harsh reality. One more reason why she couldn’t really share what had happened today, not able to
explain why she cried for over an hour after the dispute over a play.

“It was treason! And it wasn’t good for the long-term anyway. The whole thing was useless anyway
since Titus’s daughter runs away with a guy she loves and everybody is looking for her and
Saturninus, the new emperor, decides to marry the enslaved queen.”

“Good.” Chloe opened the window and snapped out the burnt filter. Usually smoking fast, with
sharp, rapid drags, she was done with a cig in the blink of an eye. Rachel wasn’t even half-way
done. “Let the motherfuckers stick together.”

Her blonde angel ginned, slowly relaxing and getting less tense. Shallow interpretation or not, it was
somehow helping with building up the distance and looking at things differently. Not to mention she
was slowly getting into the more morbid part. If her girl was bored with all the ancient politics and
moral choices, she would be staggered with some violent, gory shit. Not that the beginning was
dreary, but they could get into the real deal now.

“And then the queen’s sons find Titus’ daughter, rape her, cut off her hands and rip off her tongue so
she can’t tell anybody.” She said cheerfully. “Or write in that matter.”

“What?” Looking terrified, Chloe rolled her eyes. “Jesus. Who wrote this shit?” Then the blue confusion ran away with her gaze, getting abnormally silent. Every time the world ‘rape’ appeared or even a small reference to it, she felt her heart budging, hands shaking and focus getting blurry. Rachel might be all fine, dealing with what Frank had done to her, but for Chloe it was still fresh, sore and painful. This damn fucking asshole was recurring in her thoughts again, and the only thing she dreamed of was to bleach him out with a mental acid.

Noticing the sudden change in her girl’s behavior, Rachel shifted her arms hoping it didn’t trigger some very uncomfortable reminiscences. If so, it was better to warn Chloe than to surprise her during the premiere. Spoilers could be useful sometimes she thought, ready to continue.

“Titus’s sons, well the few that remained alive, are accused of doing all those horrible things to their sister so they are sentenced to death.” Rachel shrugged. “So, Titus is upset. “

“I bet he is.” Chloe sighed, still looking at the empty, dark beach. Her shoulder got stroked and her cheek brushed, so she turned back to her wife, trying to focus on the play, not her inner demons.

It was just a story anyway, nothing personal.

“The emperor sends Titus the message, offering a deal. It’s a lie of course, but my character doesn’t know that, or he hopes for the best. Anyway, the note says Tutus would be spared if one Titus’s sons, himself, or whoever else, would cut his left hand.” The blue eyes were watching her with pure terror. It was adorable, funny and also a bit strange. She ran fingers through her hair not sure how deep she should get into it. “It’s complicated, but I’m trying to make it as simple as possible.”

“You call it simple?” Chloe snorted. “Why is everybody ripping off some body parts in this story? And?” She urged now seriously interested.

“And Titus cuts one his hands off but his sons are being executed anyway.” Her wife explained like it was the most common thing to do. “Bummer”

“Divine. Let me guess, they got cut into pieces?”

“Not to pieces, but their heads got chopped off.” Rachel laughed, enjoying this summary way more than she thought. It felt nice to explain all those complicated events in such an easy and approachable way, so they lost their weight along the way. Plus, she loved to confuse and tease her girl. Not much, just a bit. “Believe or not, Titus is devastated by the outcome. I mean, he is devastated most of the time anyway. And, by the way, his daughter also commits suicide. Before she does so, she actually uses some sticks or whatever to write the names of people who raped her, so Titus knows who to blame.” Rolling down the window, she finally was able to get rid of her smoke too. The coast was weathering a storm though, so they should get back soon or drive on slippery roads. Not fun, especially with the lack of street lights that Oregon suffered greatly from.

“Who plays this daughter?” She heard Chloe asking.

“I don’t know.” Rachel turned to her. “It was no one at the beginning, so she could be just mentioned but now Juliet kinda wants to take her part. Are you interested?”

“Fuck, no.” Her pirate rapidly shook her head. “No. No, sunshine. I ain’t gonna do it again. One fugly bird was fine, but don’t expect me to help you this time. Please continue.” She requested nicely. “Do more people die?”

“Hell, yeah.” Rachel winked. “Anyway, Titus has one son left.”
“Still one left? Whoa. Talking big family here.”

“That’s why people had tons of children back then. Just in case.”

“Too bad they couldn’t have tons of hands because of the same reason.”

Rachel giggled.

“Titus orders this son to gather an army and attack Rome, since he is tired of this peaceful bullshit. I mean there is some more to it, but…” Recalling that she didn’t mention a few important characters, she scratched her arm wondering how to finish the story without making it even more knotty and problematic. It would be easier with a pen and paper and some flowcharts or doodles though, but she didn’t have any.

“…You make it simple. I get it.” Her blue treasure murmured, feeling weirdly stupid. “Chloe understands.”

She got punched immediately.

“Don’t offend my favorite MIT student.” Scoffing, Rachel snuggled into the blue arms and then, making herself even more comfortable she just simply had to kiss her wife. Once their lips met, she couldn’t stop and neither could the blue pirate, who grabbed her waist and dragged her closer. The small space of the car didn’t help to separate and none of them really wanted it, promising themselves that just one more second, another one, almost done. After the first light moan, usually the last red flag before the final wave of passion, Chloe paused silently asking for the story to be finished. One more kiss like that and they would jump to another topic with way less talking and the seats slid all the way back. Rachel nipped her ear but when it didn’t work out she gave up and got back to her tale. “The queen of Goths…” Great, they had to stop to talk about Victoria’s character. Damn it. “You remember the queen, right? The one who married the emperor? So, she’s cheating on her husband, and gives birth to a kid who is not Saturninus’s son and shit gets complicated.”

“I’m surprised no one died during this labor.” Licking her lips, Chloe felt her blood boiling but still tried to keep up with the story. “Or being chopped to pieces.”

“Oh, the nurse. The nurse died.” Rachel totally forgot about this part. They cut out most of this subplot anyway and she always found it not that interesting. Typical Shakespeare shit, with somebody betraying others. Her character wasn’t that much involved either. “And the queen’s lover, the father of the kid, runs away with the baby. So, no toddlers were harmed during this production. But the lover got kidnapped, tortured and blackmailed so he spills the beans about the queen cheating and stuff.”

Chloe didn’t even laugh at the hidden joke of Victoria playing an unfaithful slut. Hiding her face in her hands and shaking form the long kissing session, she found herself more disturbed than ever. The story was alright and kinda fun, but thinking that her wife would have to go through that shit was fucking awful. Even if the blue pirate supported all of Rachel’s choices, she was damn grateful that this whole acting shit got ditched. Chloe didn’t mind watching her favorite actors being tortured onscreen, especially if a big bag of popcorn was served and the sound system was awesome, but when her girl played the part it was different. Way different.

“What is it?” She moaned, this time not because Rachel’s hand landed on her thigh. “Old England Horror Story?”

“Classic literature can really surprise you.” Quite entertained by her reaction, her wife poked her arm and grinned. It was fun to talk to her, telling what she had been studying for weeks even if it was just
a slice, not the whole, big picture “I thought you liked horror.”

“I do, but this is a bit much, not to mention that you will be in the middle of it. I can’t believe you were into this shit when you were fifteen.” Shaking her head, Chloe tapped the steering wheel. “It’s fucking horrible.”

“I was into a lot of weird shit when I was fifteen and I stick to some of it.” They shared a knowing look and were damn close to kiss again, but inches away stayed in their places. Wondering how the story would feel like if they were both high as kite, Chloe murmured something hoping for this tale to end soon. Rachel smiled. “Anyway, we have Titus’s army marching onto Rome, Titus going crazy, and the emperor shitting his pants. So…”

“Happy ending?” The blue pirate suggested hopefully.

“It’s Shakespeare, baby. There’s rarely a happy ending. Long story short, Titus, who goes nuts at this point, captures the queen’s sons and kills them.”

“Oh, thank god. At least there is some justice.”

“…And bakes a pie out of their bodies. I mean he grinds the bones with the meat, so no one knows what’s inside. He invites the emperor and the queen on the feast and feeds them with their own sons’ remains and then…” Seeing her pirate getting a bit pale, she paused. “Baby, are you ok?”

Questioning Mr. Keaton’s tastes, being quite pissed at casting Rachel for another gender-bender role, and trying not to imagine her own wife drowning in blood in front of the whole city, Chloe closed her eyes and decided that taking a gasp of fresh air would really help. The atmosphere in the car got way too hot and intimate, and since solace of passion was unreachable for now, she just had to get out for a second. Jerking the door handle she quickly got out, not really feeling sick or disgusted beyond reason, but standing up would be appreciated. Yeah, stormy, night sky, what a blessing. Alarmed and a bit worried, Rachel left the car too and walked to her, with a question in her eyes.

“Baby?” She asked, brushing the locks off of Chloe’s forehead. “What happened?”

“I’m fine. It’s fine.” The blue distress kissed her hand thanking for her concern. “Are you seriously gonna eat people’s guts onstage?” Seeing an eager nod, the Chloe growled. “This Shakespeare dude was really a sick fuck. Ok, hit me.” She tapped the vinyl hood. “How does it end?”

“Well, Titus kills the queen, the emperor kills Titus and Titus’s son kills the emperor and proclaims himself as one. The end.” Rachel bowed her head and hummed a short, joyful melody finishing her performance. “More or less. I might’ve skipped some deaths here and there.”

Chloe thought for a moment, putting all the pieces together and connecting the dots. Loaded with info and distracted by the hazel, waiting look, she scratched her neck. “So, you die in this play? After killing Victoria?” She asked more worried about the actual people she knew than the whole potential performance. Something was telling her this play wouldn’t go well and it was a huge mistake for Rachel to be involved in it in the first place. To be honest she wanted her wife to drop out of this whole thing here and now but couldn’t find any reasonable arguments. Not able to send her point across Chloe moved nervously hoping that it was just a strange, fucked up feeling related to her being horny as hell and cold at the same time.

“Yeah.” Rachel confirmed and tilted her head, with a joyful spark in her eyes. “Fortunately, I will be resurrected by a kiss backstage.”

That brought Chloe back on track.
“Oh, you will.” The resurrection wasn’t needed right away, but the blue pirate decided that they needed a serious dress rehearsal. Judging by the way and how quickly Rachel melted into the kiss, Chloe wasn’t alone with her desire to come back home. “And flowers.” She murmured brushing her nose. “Don’t forget about the flowers.”

“I didn’t forget, you did.” This joke never got old, since they both loved to refer to the very beginning and their first day together. Well, maybe not to the whole thing, but most of it was adorable. Rachel poked her chest damn fucking sure that this time a decent bouquet would wait for her in the dressing room. “So, what do you think?”

Chloe pondered.

“About the play? It’s crazy, man. It’s fucking worse than ‘Hostel’ and I barely could stomach this movie. When it comes to Titus…” That was literally the worst part. “Well, poor fuck, just wanted to live in peace and made some really bad decisions. Those people around him were assholes too. I bet he would make a great emperor. Too bad the fate was against him.”

Getting oddly silent, Rachel nodded thinking how much she loved her blue treasure, how amazing and sensitive her wife really had been and how terrible she was at those kinds of discussions. Not even disappointed, she felt empty, realizing that indeed the only person who she could really enjoy exploring metaphors, allegories and comparisons was Mark.

“It wasn’t fate, baby.” She said quietly, remembering their last conversation at the bar. “It was himself.”

There was a joke there somewhere and Chloe felt it was on her.

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Later that day, he found her at the theater bar, calming herself down with a cup of hot coffee. Rachel would rather prefer to order a shot of whiskey or a simple local beer they also served but had to stay sober, treating herself with a double dose of cream and sugar instead. Finally released from her spectacular costume, she seemed so normal, small and quite broken, hunching over the table and avoiding others. Scrolling through her phone, she sent like a million cute texts to Chloe, was warming herself up with reading the archive smiling weakly and taking a sip of the hot beverage.

Jefferson watched her for a minute, thinking about the right approach when annoying Victoria Chase walked to him trying to strike a conversation. With a benevolent smirk, he sent her to hell promising to talk to her later, hoping this little snake would just fuck off and bump her ego elsewhere. There was a more critical task really worth his while. The girl nodded and strolled away, still watching him suspiciously, knowing well he shut her off to have time for Rachel. Victoria Chase snooping around was a minor danger, although he should cut the gossip’s head before it would get too exasperating.

One more reason why he should apologize or groom Rachel with a skilled compliment.

She seemed surprised when he sat by her side, also grabbing something to drink. Judging by the way she jerked, Rachel appeared to be very cautious or even afraid of him. Mark found it arousing, but still preferred her trustful and following him blindly. It was more fun. More challenging.

“I’m sorry.” He started simply, trying to sound as honest as his inner giggle let him. “I crossed the line and pushed you way too much. Sometimes I get carried away with my work so much that I
forget that the setting is not fully professional.” Gentle emotional blackmail always worked the best. She winced when called an amateur. “You did great though.” He assured her. “I shouldn’t have done it.”

Baffled, confused and still hurting, Rachel blinked not certain if he really meant it. Mark seemed sincerely concerned though, kind and sweet as she remembered him, nothing like the demanding monster from less than an hour ago. The vicious ghost became human again, but she had a hard time believing he wouldn’t attack or jump down her throat with more inquiries or painful requests.

“It will never happen again.” He assured her, still keeping his distance and showing nothing more than compassion. Being nice was quite a poison if dosed correctly. “Especially since you will never get back on stage. Or if even, I would never take another promo shot of you.”

“Yeah,” Rachel mumbled and looked at the brim of her coffee cup. The dark drops of the beverage blinked at the edge, slowly crying themselves down to the black, calm abyss. To be honest, she was damn angry, not even at him but herself, thinking about all those terrible things she had said or the more ludicrous ones that stayed in her mind unspoken. This experience woke up a lot of questions that she felt very uncomfortable with. Fuck, the morning was so cozy, safe and simple. The afternoon seemed gloomy.

Mark Jefferson stretched and sat back, sipping on his decaf coffee.

“My job was to awake all the right emotions in you.” He tried to explain. “I had to see it, provoke it, uncover all your fears and weaknesses. That’s what the stage is all about, isn’t it?”

Knowing a lot about drama, she knew he was right. Acting was just a way to heal herself, walking in someone else’s shoes but dealing with real problems through facing the fake ones. Understanding didn’t mean Rachel felt way better, knowing that some line had been crossed today and she didn’t like the new border. She even considered not talking to Mark at all after her meltdown, but now she wasn’t that sure. One way or another, it was better to stand her ground anyway and show him how disappointed she was.

“It was personal.” She hissed and then cut herself off not willing to dwell on the storm he awoke, afraid to get into details. This was a public space, and she would rather die than spill out all her doubts once in front of the others. The students ignored them though, mostly reading the script, talking to each other or browsing their phones. It felt better to sit among the thin crowd though, even if she still had to be careful about what to say.

It was safer.

“Of course, it was, and I’m sorry.” He repeated calmly, remembering the times in his life when every apology seemed like a surrender. This peculiar self-humiliation was an effortless way to control people, regain their trust and usually was taken with the benefit of the doubt, but she seemed too young to pick it up. “We know each other too well, and a simple acting exercise wouldn’t work. You are too smart for it. I wanted to capture something real. I went too far though, and I really hope that this experience wouldn’t ruin or special connection. Our friendship.” It was the first time he actually called it that, and it sounded less fake than he had assumed. “I wanted you to feel what Titus had felt. I made a mistake thinking you could take it.”

She nodded slowly, accepting this justification but a little, annoying voice in her head screamed rushing to run away. Run, run Rachel, and never look back. Bullshit. It was just her issues speaking up, those dark thoughts still jailed inside, then used this moment of weakness to raise their heads. Fucking dragon of concern. Fuck.
Mark and she were friends though.

“I can take it. I did it.” Her fingers tightened on the white, paper mug. “You were too hard on me though. Why?” Rachel whispered desperately, still sore from his treatment. “Why in that way? Why did you want me to…”

“You’re playing the part of a man who became a failure.” He whispered back, leaning to her and trying to keep the conversation private. The last thing he needed was the whole school to know what he put her through. “I wanted you to feel that way.”

“Titus wasn’t a failure.” She insisted.

Mark Jefferson breathed deeply, thankful for a detour. If Rachel really wanted to argue about it using literature as a metaphor, he was all up for it. This play was one of his favorites, and he personally advised Mr. Keaton to pick ‘Titus’. The drama teacher didn’t want to agree, complaining it was way too long and complex, but got talked into it and now thought it was his idea all along.

“He was a failure.” Mark pointed out not without satisfaction. “He decided to settle for less, rejecting a chance of ruling the empire and he paid a tremendous price for this choice. He rejected it even if begged to embrace his destiny and was the only one who was able to manage and cope with this task. He had been given a chance, standing upon a principle and played it safe.”

That was hitting close to home, so Rachel didn’t say much for a while, not willing to be humiliated once again. The feeling of being so terribly naked on stage and attacked by the flash and unnerving questions started to fade, and she pondered that maybe Mark was right. Perhaps it was really for the play, not to degrade and chasten her, bringing close to tears.

“The fate of the ruler was more unsafe though.” She responded.

Mark nodded as if he was agreeing with her, even if she couldn’t be further from the truth.

“Being in the spotlight is always perilous, although it gives you the leverage of power and deciding about how to play with the shadows. Hiding in the shadows can give you the illusion of safety until somebody would notice you, dragging you out helpless and naked. The dark corners can betray you easier than a legion of devoted followers.”

She knew he wasn’t talking only about the play but didn’t want to argue. It was better to pretend that it was just an old, English play.

“Titus wasn’t hiding. He just wanted a normal life.”

“He wanted a life that was never reachable for him.” Mark’s gaze was piercing. “Spoon fed his whole life, lucky and loved by everybody, victorious and conquering he decided to reject it for the sake of a wish that was never anything more than a dream. It wasn’t fate that slapped him in the face. It was Titus who decided to stand against it and against himself. An impossible task, not only because what he achieved, but who he was. It wasn’t a matter of choice but to understand his destiny, something he didn’t want to absorb, even regarding the years of fighting and experience.”

Rachel watched him for a moment wondering what he wanted from her. Any kind of fame, especially after today, didn’t seem appealing, and all his arguments, even if potentially true, seemed simply toxic. She knew he wanted to guide her, showing her different paths or possibilities, free from the obligation of being politically correct or following the typical school canceling methods. Rachel appreciated it, but now she got lost in her own jungle of questions, not even about what he wanted her to do, but what she wanted.
“People can be tired of fighting.” She said simply. “He picked his path, not letting everybody else decide for him.”

Just like I did, she thought. Just like I did years ago. It didn’t matter how it would end, it mattered who she shared the ride with.

“And that led him to insanity and disgrace, and in consequence to murder, cannibalism and his own death.” Jefferson shrugged. “He didn’t save anybody, not even his own reputation nor beloved children. This play is not a story about a man who got tangled in intrigue he was unable to deal with, but about a madman, who decided to settle for less. Is that why you wanted to play the lead role?”

Hearing undertones of disappointment, she winced. Jefferson was bluntly assuming that her choice was plainly stupid and would end in disaster. Well, she would love to prove him wrong but was he really wrong though? Was he?

“I was asked to do so.” She got up, looking at her watch and willing to spend the rest of the afternoon at the parking lot than keep talking to him. “And no. I didn’t resign from anything. I picked my path a long time ago. I know my destiny, and I found the pinnacle of it. It’s Chloe. It’s my wife. She’s the most important thing in my life, and I wouldn’t risk what we have for a glimpse of fame. No Everest for me, not the literal one anyway. Chloe is a hell of a challenge anyway.”

Jefferson nodded, not even trying to stop her. Knowing well that attacking the person she believed the most and was crazy in love with wouldn’t do him any good, he could only agree with Rachel. For now. Who would’ve thought that Chloe Price became one of the main obstacles that he had to defeat to get what he wanted? It was necessary to build up the doubt, to force her to question her partner, since this blue punk was the only way that made Rachel stable. He wanted to shake her foundation, see all the systems go down in flames, and inspect the ashes. He needed to see who Rachel would become without Chloe, or what kind of monster she really was when alone.

“She sure is.” Finishing his coffee, he smiled widely. “Although, quoting the play, if memory doesn’t deceive me… My mistress is my mistress…”

“…This is myself.” She whispered back, finishing the quote.

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“Rejected?” Chloe’s eyes got wider. “Rejected?!?” She almost yelled, pulling out the letter from Rachel’s hands and skimming through it quickly. There wasn’t much to go through though, just a few paragraphs, a signature, the seal, the address.

“Yeah, I’m not good for Harvard.” Her girl turned back trying to hide her tears, feeling how the world built on vain hopes and desires was falling apart so fast. The sharp gust of wind helped her eyes to stay dry, but not for long. “I’m not good enough.”

The blue pirate looked at the letter, then at her, then got back to the note again trying to find an overlooked sentence, something for them to hold on to, but there was nothing. No hope. Wrinkling the paper in her hands, she stepped forward wanting to hug Rachel, but her wife walked a few steps away, avoiding any kind of touch.

Chloe shook her head, tearing out her beanie, still too shocked to construct a response. Everything was so going so good though. Everything was so damn perfect, and now it was ruined by some
stupid ass decision made by some dickhead on the other side of the country. She felt angry, frustrated, and furious, thinking it had to be some nightmare or a nasty joke. It couldn’t be happening, not for real, not for them and not now. If Chloe got into MIT, Harvard was a sealed deal for Rachel. Not that it really mattered where her girl would get her diploma, but since her wife wanted it, she should get it.

Feeling useless made her more livid.

“You’re fucking kidding me!” The more she tried to reach Rachel, the more her wife wandered toward the empty, dark beach, avoiding any kind of contact. Chloe got desperate running after her. “How could you be rejected? Did they give you any reason? There has to be a reason! Maybe somebody’s gonna drop, you know.” She tried to think about other options. “You know... It happens, right? It’s only January.”

“That’s not how Harvard works!” Rachel turned back to her. “I’m not even waitlisted, Chloe! This neatly worded letter is just one big fucking no.” She wanted to throw the paper away, but her pirate managed to hide it in one her jacket’s pockets. Even if Rachel had the full right to trash this piece of garbage, it was better to wait for a less nervous time.

“Listen,” Chloe rose her hands trying to calm her angel down. They both were shaking. “There has to be a way.”

It was probably the worst thing she could’ve done, since Rachel just scoffed, crossing her arms on her chest, unwilling to listen. Her whole life plan just got twisted, as fate was indeed laughing at her face. Everything, including their move to Boston, her career in law or seeing the stupid, confused grin on her father’s face was out of her reach. Not existing. It disappeared in the mist of the evening tide, as easily as the dry, arid sand.

“Yeah. Next year.” She said trying to find some hope, but there was none. Fuck. “Maybe. Or never.” And then in the middle of standing still and another disappointed head shake, Rachel broke down and started sobbing.

Breaking her defense, her blue treasure held her tight, kissing her hair desperately. Rachel tried to sneak out but was stopped despite the frantic force and tons of confusion mixed with love. Hissing she attempted to break free but couldn’t succeed even in that simple task. Failure. She was a fucking failure.

“No. No. No!” Chloe begged her to stay in her arms. “Please. They have to accept you! You are the most talented and knowledgeable person I know! The most wonderful and amazing and…”

“No for them.” Rachel cried openly, hiding her face in the old, leather jacket. Sobbing and sniffling, she couldn’t stop wishing just to become numb and withdrawn, like a few moments ago but being rejected was too painful. Harvard was supposed to be the highpoint of her last year journey, the summit of her change proving that getting clean and working hard paid off. Now, it was just a joke, a punishment for trying too hard.

Caressing the blonde hair, Chloe felt her own heart racing against every weep. If she could, she would fucking break into this fucking University and force the admission office under a gunpoint to change their minds. A few hours ago, she felt so fucking confident and in control, believing that nothing could stop them and now useless and fighting for her girl to stay in the embrace, the blue rebel didn’t know what to do.

“If they don’t, it’s their loss, okay? You gave them a chance, they rejected you, alright, but fuck them. All of them. Rach…” Chloe tried to look into her eyes, but her wife ran away with her gaze,
finding the jacket way safer. “There are more colleges out there. What about Yale? And Brown and…”

Her suggestions were awarded with a harsh punch in her chest.

“It’s too late, Chloe. No one would accept me.” Rachel wept. She was so sure about this one that she didn’t apply anywhere else. Was it really just destiny, or a mistake that she made, believing so much in herself?

“Don’t say it. They will.” Her blue pirate opposed unsurely. “They have to! If you can’t get in, who can? It has to be a mistake…”

“No mistake.” He was right. Mark was right. Motivation wasn’t everything after all. Was it the price for fighting her destiny and picking something nice and simple? No, it was just fucking literature, a discussion about the 500-year-old play. This had to be a coincidence but didn’t feel like it. “Fuck… Fuck!” Rachel cried. “Fuck!”

Exhaling deeply, the blue rebel looked at the wild, dark waves of ocean hoping for a hint or some magical answer. The empty beach seemed even less welcoming and more terrifying than before. Surrounded by the cold darkness and no help whatsoever Chloe felt so lost and alone. She always prepared to be the main disappointment and regret, and now standing on the other side of the fence she had no idea what was expected from her. Except for support of course. Tons of useless, fucking support.

This setback was as hurtful for the blue pirate as for her girl, or so it seemed. A slap in the face of her dream and recently gained self-confidence. Like she was the one to blame here, like she was the reason it wasn’t real.

Was it?

“So, maybe something else? UMass, for example…” Chloe suggested, cuddling Rachel even more. Massachusetts state university wouldn’t be that bad of choice though and would let them to still be together. Oh, fuck, they might have to separate if… No, no, she couldn’t think like that. Chloe would prefer to drop out from college than do it alone. “I know it’s not your standard and shit, but you can always switch or something.”

Rachel pushed her back so harsh that her rebel almost fell, holding onto the car door.

“UMass!?” The hazel eyes flashed precariously with golden and dark spots. “You don’t get it, Chloe, do you? You got your nice, cozy spot at MIT, everything is fucking awesome for you!” It felt so wrong to blame her treasure, but Rachel couldn’t help herself. She pushed her again. “Why do I have to settle for less, huh? Why?”

Stunned and flabbergasted, Chloe frowned but didn’t throw a fit, but felt like a proverbial dam broke releasing a river of grievances. Cracking under pressure and witnessing one of the worst of Rachel’s meltdowns she frantically tried to find an explanation avoiding blaming herself. It was just a school though, a pretentious, famous university. Their life didn’t end here, but it felt like it did. She couldn’t help but feel that the past and previous mistakes started to haunt them in earnest.

“Not for less, but… but… just for now?” She murmured cursing her brevity. “Like, just until we figure something out. Please, Rach. I promise. It will be fine.” Managing to catch Rachel again, Chloe closed her in an embrace, even if she had to fight for it for a good minute. Her wife bent over, still trembling and wiping off her tears. Then she screamed from the top of her lungs, trying to get rid of this degrading sob and inept anger. The ocean ate up her yell saying nothing, mocking her with
the calmness of the waves, teasing the shore with another stroke of water.

A fix. A fix would be fucking awesome.

Her blue treasure didn’t want to let her go no matter what, ready to get hit, punched or even slapped. She was crying too, even if quietly and better at hiding her tears. Trying to stay afloat of this tide the only thing she could use was the candid force of her embrace and wild hope that everything happened for a reason. Rocking her angel in her arms, she closed her arms, speechless and terrified. Step by step it was making an effect as her girl was slowly calming down.

“It won’t be fine, Chloe.” She heard Rachel’s whispering in a cold and uncaring way. “Nothing will be fine. “

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She wiped the tears, then once again. Fast, quick, before she would break down and cry, weeping for hours, as she was used to. Shaking from the artificial fever and sweating from the fixed heater, Max picked up the first photo from the pile of polaroids but was still afraid to look. The decision was made though. She closed her eyes, but instead of happy memories, she saw them again. Encountering Kris and Steph today, cuddling in the corner, kissing and promising the new, better future without her in the picture or even around, was too much. Too fucking much. The proverbial last straw, like they said. The last straw of time.

No.

Was it stealing? Maybe. Changing somebody’s life, twisting it, steering in the opposite direction was always problematic, but she had done it before anyway. Max was fed up though. She was done. Sacrificing Chloe was one thing. Seeing her blue pirate, her own pirate, being constantly happy and on cloud nine because of Rachel yet another. She came to terms with this issue, somehow forgetting about the what ifs and carried on, imagining she was made from steel and wire. When she had seen them the first time, she felt like screaming but didn’t say a word. The scream became a whisper and then transformed into dull, tedious silence. It didn’t bother her later, not that much at least, as she got used to this throbbing, quiet pain inside. It was a closed, hurtful chapter, and she paid a huge price to seal the deal. Getting back and forth, waiting years for things to turn, hoping and pulling strings carefully was simply too much. She felt like a gear in an old vintage engine, that turned for the greater good but didn’t question its own existence.

Sacrificing eternity to make others happy. Standing against destiny and others’ fates. Forgetting about herself, she just wanted to make things right. Her whole adult life depended on making things right, bending them, dealing with laughs, humiliations, gossips and concerned whispers. Days and months, and then again, in her head or for real, just to correct time and space. Then she found love. The real one. Somebody, who made her forget about the blue pirate’s smirk and taught her that failure was a part of life. Somebody who she wanted to build her own world with, not even sure what it meant. Her own life. She didn’t have any until Steph appeared.

And then Steph was gone.

No. Fuck, no. Max had the full right to be selfish.

She looked at the selfie taken in September. Things weren’t that cheerful then, Rachel was right, but
weren’t terrible either. Knowing what happened or was about to happen would give her the strength to carry on, play this game right, pulling the right card and win the table. Just one more time, just to make sure, just to make things a little bit better. Deep down she knew it never worked that way, remembering the hundreds of outcomes that ended up in disaster. Chloe dying in her arms. Rachel dead and buried. Steph not even knowing about her existence. Jefferson playing with one victim after another.

Death. Death and destruction.

No.

Coughing, she got sick to her stomach, feeling the nosebleed appearing and almost throwing up in her mouth. She touched her face, but her fingers remained dry. Good. There was still time. Time. Max almost laughed and then crawled on the floor of her room. The warmth of the heater was overwhelming, she would prefer to go through it in a taciturn and cold place. It was hard, she felt guilty, but that was the only way out. She looked at the pile of other photos. Chloe smoking in the parking lot. Steph and Rachel by the newly bought van. A blue shirt hanging on the side of old rusty. Slices of lives that she wanted to change, maybe even destroy.

Fuck it.

She wouldn’t change much. Rachel would be still alive. Chloe would be still hers and back in Blackwell. Kate would already be at home dropping out of school and Kelly would be still missing. Even Kris would probably come back but fuck it. She wouldn’t interfere with the marriage, explosion by the lighthouse or any other event. She would be careful. Max wanted just one thing to fix. Only one.

Steph.

She tried to focus on the photograph once more. The light buzz under her fingers was making her nauseous, and her head started to spin. It was like hearing colors and tasting the sounds in this weird aluminum way when everything was whirling and whizzing, twirling and swiveling. One more second, two and she would get back and start fixing. No barn, no weird questions, no constant doubts about herself.

She had been fighting with her fate long enough.

Crazy, crazy, crazy, her mind was pulsating and repeating this one word over and over. She focused more biting her lip and cutting the skin. The polaroid got marked with tears, sweat, and blood at this point but it should still work. It should still be fine.

Max could feel it coming. This well-known rush in her veins was speeding up, filling her with the power that she almost forgot how to use. Closing her eyes, she gasped trying to prepare herself for a rough ride. It could be quite painful or at least unpleasant, sometimes even forcing her to vomit after. For the blink of an eye, gravity wouldn’t exist, space would multiply by the realities she had lived through, and her own body would be ripped apart and then put together. Or at least it felt like it.

Finally ready, she gritted her teeth and pushed.

Nothing happened.

She pushed again.

Still nothing.
Max gasped, tossing the photo away and grabbed another one. Focus, focus, push. Nothing. Again. She took a different one. This time she almost got it, but nothing really changed, nothing moved. It was hard to see anything though. The shapes of the objects in the photo got blurry, hiding behind a colorful, piercing mist. She almost got this flash of light, the bright cold breeze of a rewind. Almost, but it didn’t work. Nothing. Fuck. One more.

Hitting the floor, she cursed and then felt her nose bleeding, marking her hoodie with red, splattered stains. A book or two fell from the shelf, the glass filled with cheap whiskey vibrated a rocked a little. Max didn’t care. Focus, focus, push. Hope for a flash of light. Mist of colors. Then focus one more time. Focus. Flash. Focus. Please.

Nothing. Just the wrinkled, thick plastic of a polaroid photo in her hands, her breathing heavily, bleeding, sweating and crying. Same room, same date, same time.

Exhausted and shattered by her own enervation, Max dropped the last photo on the floor, almost fainting. The rewind power was gone. If she had any power though, if she wasn’t going crazy, it disappeared entirely, jailing her in this fucking, miserable reality, when nothing could be fixed by playing with time. Done. She was done. Either time got tired of her, or she fucked up the world so hard that it became unchangeable. Max felt like crying or screaming, but she just lied on the floor in silence.

Nothing could be done.

Nothing was fine.

Nothing.
This thought. One annoying, painful thought she couldn’t scratch off, erase like an unwanted scribble, moving on to something less itchy or mentally pleasant. One impression that always paved its way up, not bothered by any crossroads and obstacles she nervously tried to build up. One need that was making her sick to her stomach, tightening it into a firm, tense knot, making her panicky with her hands shaking. One fucking thought returning, tickling, prickling and burning, changing doubts into statements and making her scream silently every time it reappeared or even lingered in her mind’s outskirts. Always there. Constantly.

Messing her up.

It was unfair though. Damn fucking wrong. She couldn’t sleep, eat, work, and even simply reading a textbook was an issue. For a second or two she was fine, shaking it off and being able to function, but then it hit her again, like a bucket of cold water reminding about the previous mistakes, quick words, or decisions that led to a dead end. Sorely remaining between one breath and another anxious gasp, it showed up yet again with full force and then cheerfully disturbed all the tasks she tried to dive herself into. Stupid. Damn unnecessary. Ridiculous. Annoyed as hell, Steph wanted to yell at herself, tearing those questions apart, scrape it off, walling herself off, but nothing had worked so far. The thought was there anyway though, forcing her to follow every glimpse of the small figure emerging in the shadows, materializing like an unwanted dream, a throbbing commotion. A shape she had known so well.

Max Caulfield, was standing only thirty feet from the white van, chatting cheerfully, laughing, and sipping on her drink, taking a break from a steamy, rhythm pulsating, smoke-filled club. The party was in full swing, but she didn’t care, finding the reviving conversation with the Vortex club members way more interesting than the dancefloor itself. The latter wasn’t amazingly shocking though, but the crowd she had been surrounding herself with was more than problematic. To Steph’s astonishment, they were welcoming and hugging her like a longtime friend, even if a few weeks ago the top dogs of the Blackwell assholity association would have a severe problem remembering her name. Even if still shy and playing things close to her chest, Max Caulfield apparently treasured their attention, swimming in the deep waters of half-sober chit-chat with grace and unpredictably keeping them hungry for more. Courtney, Dana, Hayden, even Warren Graham, who was more like a Vortex follower than a member, stopped by, determined to get to know her better. Echoes of their voices, mixed with the low, steady, heartbeat of club music were melting in the cold air, fueled by the clouds of their breaths and cackles. It was hard to say if the little freckle actually ignored the white van and its proud owner on purpose or by accident, too busy with switching between the topics, laughing at another joke or letting someone borrow a lighter. A lighter that the Max Caulfield Steph had known had never carried.

Obviously, things had changed and they changed quickly, evolved into this weird version of reality. It was hypothetically typical though, healthy and more than acceptable. People moved on, made new friends, tested their limits and left their safety nets. Why would Max be an exception? Because she was so special, still special, against all the odds and confirmations that this was definitely over? Because staring at her still was hurting? Finally fighting with an overpowering depression and discovering how much her company was appreciated was clearly working for the little freckle though. Good. Well. Not good. Seeing her unhappy and miserable, following Chloe or just sitting in the library alone, had been heartbreaking for Steph but now watching her like behaving that, so far away, distant and different, felt abnormal in the worst possible way. Max had never been the party type though, purposely avoiding the cluster of sweat and illegal vice, but now was happily serving
herself quite a shock therapy. To be fair, she was still treating those festivities as a delicate ground, however, slowly but surely getting accustomed to the unique concept that being social wasn’t as scary as she had previously thought. Well, fuck it. It was normal. Looked-for. Needed. Great for her, right?

Not right.

This fucking thought. This need of stopping her, not letting her deep dive into the Vortex abyss. This demand to hug her, maybe for a second too long, to look into her eyes and crack a better joke than those dick-waffles were popping. Make her smile, make her feel better not because her sorrow was Steph’s fault overall, but she deserved the best. Just to do something so Max wouldn’t have to blend with those people, just… Because…

Steph scoffed. This pondering about the impossible was getting out of hand. Pretending not to be interested at all and hiding in the dark stomach of her van, she turned around ready to get back to work. Not able to focus, almost immediately she stumbled upon a Tupperware filled with nails, pins, and screws. Steph lost her balance and almost fell to her knees, stopped mercifully by the metal containers. The van trembled, rocking from left to right, when hissing from pain, she tried to get up. Then she froze, hoping that this sudden noise didn’t get anybody’s attention. The last thing Steph needed was this wild bunch jumping on to help. She was safe though. Max couldn’t care less, ignoring the clamor, too busy with discussing the plans for tonight. Blind, deaf and away.

Was it something that Steph wanted though?

Her ex seemed liberated. Happy. Free. Content. On the right path. Fusing and blending with the pack, getting their attention and appreciation, the little freckle left her shell and taught herself how to dance. Max. Her Max. No, not hers anymore. Mumbling a profanity, Steph closed her eyes, but it didn’t help. Despite her supposedly amazing new life, she couldn’t stop weirdly regretting of letting this delicate, sensitive creature go. Fucked up, right? Thinking about her and asking herself those burning questions starting with a bunch of what ifs and how so’s, was nerve-wracking though. Ex-girlfriends didn’t become exes out of nowhere and recalling only the joyful moments was a mistake. A huge mistake that Steph kept repeating every other breath for the last week or so. Or longer.

Sniffling, she turned her head avoiding looking at the little freckle and grabbing another perfectly coiled up cable basking on her van’s floor like a tamed, sleeping snake. It definitely needed to be rolled yet again. The strive for perfection was always helping when it came to an unwanted contemplation and served as a perfect distraction. Her hand hurt, but it was too dark to estimate the damage. The pain was actually refreshing, just like a breath of air from the smoking pack outside. It made her feel good, bad, cold, wrong, and damn lonely.

Lonely.

The cable almost slipped from her cold and stiff fingers. Close to tears, Steph felt so betrayed and isolated, not only because Max was so out of reach, her palm was indeed bleeding, or it was yet another evening spent on diving into work. Recently she learned that there were different stages of loneliness. First, it was the basic one, excruciatingly sad when you became invisible to others. Then the next stage, a painful emptiness when you parted ways with somebody close. And then the worst, when everything was allegedly fine and dandy, but not, and she felt left out without a reason and lost with the raging fire of her own mind. Her brand new and exciting relationship was supposedly still blooming though. For months if not years, Steph had prayed and begged for Kris to come back, but when it had happened, the charm quickly got old. There was some truth to the saying that walking into the same river didn’t pay back. Or something. Steph wasn’t that big on quotes or sayings.
It just wasn’t the same as with Max.

To be entirely honest, Kris, lovely, caring and damn great in bed, was still persistent about building their future together, but it seemed more like a harsh business plan than a fairy tale. The Prescott’s daughter quickly took over the family fortune and started to solve a lot of issues with tons of money, not able to understand that for some stage managers it wasn’t the only way to go. Surprising Steph with expensive gifts and trips became a new norm, while Kris herself got back to her former life, keeping in touch with wealthy and powerful friends. These people didn’t really take Gandalf the gay seriously, more tolerating her around than bonding or even making an effort to know her better. It wasn’t just the difference between the social statuses and in wealth but also age. Folks who surrounded Kris talked about their companies, families, marriages or how to get a loan for their first business venture, something that a college kid, as they liked to call Steph, wasn’t very much into. Kid, just a kid, grow up faster, they laughed at her face and Kris was just politely smiling, not really helping much. Fuck, Steph hated their guts, and the fact that she lost touch with her own friends didn’t help either. On top of everything, her girlfriend was always damn fucking busy, either working, managing or spending time with her annoying crew. A lot of dates got delayed, a lot of meetings canceled, since there was always yet another conference call with New York, another foundation report to read or some charity event to prepare for. Prescott’s time was precious, Steph’s not so much.

Making up was even worse sometimes as she had been taken to Paris twice in the last two months, gotten a new watch, new phone, new laptop and when offered her rent to be paid by her girlfriend, she bluntly refused. Steph started to feel like a trophy wife, already conquered, tamed and taken for granted. Yes, sure, Kris was adorable, cute, amazing and loving. Yes, their sex life was more than satisfying. Yes, she was fun, but never really listened trying to pay for her mistakes with a stash of Benjamins rather than actual effort. Cash she didn’t really make but inherited though, and spent insanely easily, compensating them both for the rough time in Brazil. Yet, spoiling was mixed with the small suggestions that this stage-managing thing couldn’t be a choice of life and Steph should actually widen her horizons, finding something more appropriate to do than dragging around some old metal cases every Friday. Like, for example, considering a splendid career that would fit the rich bitch profile, or just exist, waiting for Kris at home, preferably with a glass of wine in her hand and not entirely dressed. Great. Well, not that great though. Fucking terrible. Steph hated being dependent, and her legendary patience was running drastically damn low. Biting her tongue, she withstood a lot, but it was a matter of time for this dam to break entirely. Lately, they had been arguing more times than Steph could count, leaving them both empty-handed and not improving things even a slight bit. Perhaps that was why Steph woke up almost every night dreaming about this one particular person, one shy butterfly who she decided to ditch nearly six months prior and then sealed the deal jumping into the arms of her first girlfriend so hastily. This door was closed though, shut down, done, but Steph found herself missing Max more than she was able to admit. They had had problems too, sure, but nothing they couldn’t deal with together in the long run.


The cable was rolled up. Done. She really should unload this van, check in and drive away, but such a simple thing as getting out became an issue. Steph found herself so damn afraid that Max would notice her, even if deep down she hoped to be spotted. Walking back and forth, like a wild animal in a small cage, she contemplated what to do next, wishing the little freckle would get back to the party and missing her sight already.

The club’s back door busted open, rattling and squeaking, getting shut back quickly before too much of blasting steam, booming music or pumping lights escaped the steamy inside. Somebody yelled, somebody else cursed, a trot of quick steps and a zip of a lighter followed. One more joined the small crew outside immediately involved in the banter, endeavoring to fit in amongst the dry smiles
flavored with the mid-February cold. Lurking outside, Steph tried to guess who that could be, but the backyard shadows always became way deeper after the glimpse of the club’s blinding light, keeping the smokers safe and unrecognizable. It might as well be one of Arcadia Bay’s residents though, not necessary a Blackwell apprentice. Students and locals mingled rarely, but the Vortex club made a gracious exception, allowing the college frat packs to get drunk and high with sons and daughters of unemployed fishermen and lumberjacks. It was Valentine’s day for crying out loud though, no one wanted or deserved to be lonely. This and cheap beer and shots of vodka served without any burning questions about IDs or date of birth in general.

A Valentine’s day Steph was spending in her white van though, with her hand bleeding, shaking from cold and sweating to the bone. Alone. Her girl was supposed to show up soon, but God knew when and if it would happen. Perhaps Kris would just message her calling the whole thing off or maybe she would be sweet and apologetic again, only to repeat the entire thing in a few hours, days or weeks.

Max would never do that. Never.

Would she?

Feeling a weird wetness on her cheeks, Steph took a deep breath. Tired of running in circles in a mental marathon, one day questioning her feelings for the actual girlfriend, the other laughing at her doubts, she had never felt so lost before. Sometimes she was able to convince herself that her confusion was caused by the rapid change in Max’s behavior, on the other hand, the feelings toward the little freckle intensified more and more. Oh, and Kris of course. She loved Kris, she would always love Kris, but then again, her girlfriend was driving her fucking crazy. Up and down, back and forth, amusing as fucking hell. Although even if breaking up wasn’t really on her list, Kris and she didn’t get along that well. Moreover, they both knew it was more than just a short-lived crisis with some sweet moments here and there, mostly between the sheets. In conclusion, every single day Steph felt more and more like a cheater in the making, thinking about one and being with the other, even if there was no actual chance for any betrayal occurring. Keeping her distance, Max was of course polite enough to greet her and even ask some very random, basic questions about the weather or even the Prescotts, but then usually wandered off quickly. Smart. Clever. Cool. Well, not that much.

Not cool at all.

When somebody banged on the van’s side, Steph almost got a heart attack.

“Gingrich the great or Gandy the gay.” Victoria crossed her arms on her chest leaning over the car. It had been quite some time since the fashion snake decided to brighten her existence with a direct conversation. Well, quite refreshing as well. “I was always wondering why people think you’re so wise and yet you keep making the same mistakes over and over. I didn’t expect to see you here especially in that kind of…” Chase’s eyes narrowed into two green, vicious lines. “…position. Tying to train with free weights for your dragon hunting?”

“Delivering light,” Steph mumbled back, not willing to get into a fight and rubbing her eyes quickly. The last thing she needed was the fashion snake noticing one of her mortal enemies tearing up for no reason. Not to mention, there were two explanations for Victoria to start a chit-chat without her minions around. Either it was for information she would love to obtain, more than likely about Kris, or Chase was simply bored out of her mind, looking for easy prey. Both options were shit. The cables got even more interesting than before. Or the cases. Cases needed to be moved. Or something. Somehow. Like now.

She turned around acting like she was busy.
Victoria straightened up, not really convinced. “I thought that kind of filthy work wasn’t your area of interest anymore.” She pursed her lips. The fact that she had to yell inside the van to outshout the rumble was humiliating. This girl wanted to ignore her, well, good fucking luck. “Or perhaps you’re just addicted to filth.”

The noise in the van got cut immediately, and Victoria could feel this girl’s blood boiling. Nothing tasted better than a sweet and short provocation, even if caused by a low blow.

“I’m addicted to the things I love,” Steph responded slowly, finally reappearing, jumping off and closing the van’s door. Close to snapping, she had to use all her strength to remain calm. It was a shitty day that really didn’t need a cherry on top in the form of a blonde, nosey bitch. “And people. I’m leaving all the filth to you.”

That had to hurt, but Victoria didn’t respond at once, was watching her for a moment, idling on her words and wondering how far she’d be willing to go. The infamous affair between Steph and Nathan’s sister was no secret by any means by now, even if the couple liked to think otherwise. On the other hand, biting back and using it to her leverage could cost the fashion snake a lot. Gandy, Gandalf, Gollum or whatever this girl was called amongst her peers had some serious connections now and could complicate Victoria’s life in a snap. It would be nice to play with her a bit though and actually have some fun today, since everybody was so disgustingly nice talking about love, heart-shaped cookies and vomiting pink.

The club’s back door got slammed again. Somebody got greeted with a yell and a wave. Trot, snap, lighter’s zip, Max laughing again, some hugs. Even if tempted, Steph didn’t peer at them focusing on the fashion snake only. Victoria moved nervously, bit her lip and then took a step forward hiding in the vehicle’s shadow. It would be a disgrace to be seen talking to 20 percent of Arcadia Bay’s gay population on Valentine’s day without a real or fake date waiting for her inside. Some people would make a very wrong assumption, and she wouldn’t hear the end of the stupid homo jokes.

“Addictions can be deadly.” She said finally, still tempted to tease Kris’s new favorite.

“So can curiosity be,” Steph responded looking straight into the green, narrowed eyes and doing everything not to seem interested in the smoking crew. Usually invisible or left alone by the popular crowd, she had never been so tempted to strangle Victoria Chase with her bare hands. Since it wasn’t an option, a good word fight had to suffice.

It got cut short though.

“Victoria Chase in all her glory decided to join the dyke club?” The awkward standoff was torn apart by a familiar voice resonating in the dark. Dragging a smoke, Chloe slowly approached them, walking a little bit funny. A certain amount of beers or a secretly smoked joint was probably to blame, but she looked damn sober regarding the circumstances. “And flirting with my dear friend here?” Theatrically shaking her hand, the blue pirate smirked mischievously, knowing exactly how to strike. Rachel trained her well though. The next step would be calling this bitch Tori. “About time, girl, good for you. And what a day to actually take this step.” She tapped the van’s side and grinned widely, knowing that even suggesting such a thing would make Victoria go nuts.

The fashion snake looked like she was about to bite off the blue pirate’s head.

“I would never fall so low.” Not willing to make a spectacle out of herself and still trying to remain hidden, she rose her chin up ready for a fight. Scaring this punk asshole shouldn’t be that hard.

“Fuck off, Price.”

A dangerous spark appeared in the blue eyes as Chloe just laughed out loud getting everybody’s
attention. Provoking Victoria wasn’t one of her main goals but regarding how Chase had been acting lately it would be a sin to miss this opportunity. Victoria had been a monstrous bitch while hanging out with Nathan. Without him, she hit a new low getting into everybody’s business, and a few quite random acts of kindness didn’t change the current of the outgoing war between her, Rachel, and everybody involved. It just got worse.

Not to mention the blue rebel had a secret plan in her mind.

“That’s an interesting way to pronounce be my valentine.” Putting her hand on Chase’s shoulder felt like petting an alligator. Chloe winked still grinning. “Sorry, Victoria, I’m more than taken, but if you need a good tip on how to start let me know. I’ll fill you in. Not literally though.” She lowered her voice to a conspiracy whisper and then chuckled again when her hand got shaken off, and Chase turned around almost running back to the club. “Good luck with your hunting!” Chloe yelled after her, took a long drag of her smoke and then turned to Steph, who opened up the van again trying to disappear as well. “Need a hand?” She offered as if nothing had happened and it was the most natural thing to say.

Well, it was. A long time ago.

It had been a while since they talked for real. Ages. Months. Felt like years. Yet another thing that went to shit lately although it was a very wrong time and place for a possible reunion. Having Chloe around felt like coming home though, like something was finally turning out fine. This rebel had her back regardless, even if it meant kicking Victoria’s gold-plated and diamond studded ass. Touching. So touching that Steph almost teared up again.

Weird. Fuck. Well… Damn it.

“Nah, I’m good,” she responded shaking her head, keeping her hands busy and hoping that this weird chest tightening hadn’t affected her voice. “Thanks.” Chloe didn’t walk away though, still smoking and watching her a little too intensely. Chasing Chase away gave her the opportunity to finally bond with her friend and wasn’t going to waste this chance even if the only thing the blue pirate could think of was just standing there awkwardly. “Do you have any gloves?” Steph murmured hissing in pain, still bleeding and trying to push one of the crates out. The help came immediately though. Despite the fact that they weren’t very much on speaking terms, the blue rebel was always up for some loading, unloading and serious conversation with one of her best friends.

Just like the good, old times.

They wrestled with the previously picked luggage for a second. This old mixer packed with an amp weighed tons but none of them wanted to give up, huffing and puffing while pushing it out. It would be reasonable to walk to the Vortex pack and ask some jerks to prove their muscles’ strength, but both of them subconsciously preferred to keep it private.

“Nope, I came unprotected.” Chloe confessed panting heavily, when they finally put the metal box on the cold, muddy ground. “How are things?” She tried once again to act casual and friendly, but the elephant in the room, or actually the van was just too big of a beast. An inaudible mumble was the only answer. Well, shit. Talking to Steph had been probably one of the easiest things in the world and now seemed so difficult. How did people do small talk though? “Does Max know you’re here?” She asked before biting her tongue and calling herself all the names in the book. Mentioning the little freckle was the worst thing she could’ve done but coming here she was repeating in mind not to mention Max, not to even say her name, no Max, no, no… And of course, did it in the first five minutes.

Hella great. Congrats.
“Of course, she does.” Steph winced and took a step back like a little kid caught stealing cookies. Peering at the chatty bunch by the door she noticed that Max was gone as well though, probably getting back to the party or following Victoria. Anyway, she had to notice Steph’s presence before, one way or another. This white van was quite recognizable after all, and it became a school tradition for Steph to show up helping with the sound system. So, Max knew. Probably. Hopefully. Perhaps. “Who do you think I am, Chloe?” Seeing the bewilderment so widely painted on the pirate’s face, she took a deep breath trying to put herself together. “Sorry, I hoped to be done with it before I stumbled upon one of you.”

“One of us? You mean Rachel and me?” Frowning, Chloe ditched the still lit up smoke, getting damn serious. Her friend wanted to run away inside her car but got stopped quickly. “C’mon now. Steph, wait a second, alright? We really should talk. I know I’ve been acting off, but I really don’t have anything against you or Kris or this whole gay heaven now.” They didn’t really hang out much lately not only because of Steph’s new relationship and Max crying her eyes out, but Chloe had no idea how actually to start a conversation or even greet the DND queen. She was fine with her friend dating the Prescott’s daughter, really. Or at least she didn’t mind much. Kris was hot, cool, and not stupid. Good score. Chloe would still prefer Steph to date Max but was perfectly aware she could shove her preferences up her ass. It was time to finally settle some things and start acting like human beings, rise above it or some shit, reconnect and move on. Taking the first step wasn’t something Chloe was really used to though, even if had made progress in certain areas. There was no secret that if Rachel hadn’t decided to hunt her down four years ago and claimed the ownership, the only thing the blue pirate would be doing now would be sitting in her room and counting the cracks on her ceiling.

276 if she remembered correctly.

“We’re still friends.” She caught Steph’s arm prevent her from hiding in the shadows yet again. “Dude, it’s not like I’m not happy for you, but it’s just hella fucked up, you know?”

Her friend nodded looking at her feet, feeling this weird tense cry back in her chest again. She wasn’t stupid knowing very well that this unruly, subtle as a ton of bricks pirate just awkwardly wanted them to be buddies again, play DND, drink a beer or two, talk smack about school and all, but fuck, it wasn’t that easy. Steph wanted nothing more than to just speak to somebody, get drunk and complain about her love life, but Chloe was probably one of the worst choices. Too close to Max, she would quickly say a thing too much and not intentionally cause some drama. It was a relief that she really wanted Steph back in her life though and the blue confusion was more than understandable.

“I know. I get it. It’s fine and don’t worry. Don’t feel obligated to help me or… dropping my shit.” She chuckled seeing one more Tupperware slipping from Chloe’s hands. The blue rebel smirked shyly, picking it up from the ground at once. “And don’t you worry about me. I’m fine. Thanks for that though.” She pointed out at the club. “Chase is being more of a bitch every single day.”

Grateful for sidetracking, Chloe smiled yet again, this time boldly. Seeing Victoria running away had a specific flavor of triumph and felt damn satisfying. At least one thing she could do. Steph seemed tense, stressed and miserable regardless though, so it wasn’t only the Vortex club CEO’s fault. Chloe Price was never great at this intuition kinda thing, but it didn’t take a psychic to know something was off and the brawl with Chase was just the tip of the iceberg. The blue pirate scratched her neck, not really sure if she should ask what was wrong, knowing for sure that Steph wouldn’t just spill the beans. Why couldn’t people just be direct, like really?

She sucked at this.
“Dating the rich and popular has some downsides, one of them is Chase snooping around with her phone like a freaking sniper, hoping to catch you with some dirt,” Chloe stated, trying to share a sneak peek of first-hand experience. She could write a book about this particular matter like in no time. “This bitch lives for it, I swear. And about you…” Uh, great. This discussion changed into a serenade of deep breaths and long sighs. “Damn, man. I know things weren’t exactly straightforward between us, but I just want to make sure you’re fine. Where are you staying? With the North brothers?” She asked, knowing for a fact that Steph still hadn’t picked up her things from Max’s room nor move in with Kris.

“No. Not anymore.” Came the response muffled by the metal, cold walls of the white van. Confronted with one of the burning issues, Steph was able to sneak out and dive back into work. “Mikey has to focus on his exams, and Drew…” Clang. Hiss. Chloe rolled her eyes. “He has a girlfriend now and needs some personal space. I got back to my parents for now and will ask for another dorm room or something, since…” Another metal clangor forced the blue pirate to get in as well and help with another piece. This time it was a Marshall amp with head and speaker, a damn freaking monster that should be dragged out by like five frat boys or something, not two skinny girls. Especially if one of them had dark circles below her eyes, lost tons of weight and was pale as hell.

“I got it.” Chloe gasped, taking off her beanie and wiping off her forehead wondering how Steph was usually dealing with this stuff on her own. It was worse than a gym that the blue pirate visited once and promised to never step foot in that place ever again. Why would somebody pay to get tired? She could get it for free. “You can always crash at our place.” She offered when they moved the big package one foot closer to the threshold. “I mean our dorm, chill. Rachel wouldn’t mind.”

The vast, black chest leaned to the left, almost falling on the rest of supposedly vulnerable and valuable stuff. Swearing loudly, Steph lost her grip, straightened up and wrapped her hand in some rag. Good, peaceful sleep and not skipping meals would also help with rebuilding her strength but who cared. It might’ve been just Chloe’s imagination, but she seemed hurt, like in a physical sense. Flesh and blood, that kind of shit.

This stage thing was really an arduous work.

“Rachel wouldn’t. Max would. Damn, you Chloe.” Steph said, getting angry as hell out of nowhere. Always rational and composed she was used to giving advice not getting for a solution to her problems. Problems, that seemed to have no end. The offer was generous though and so in Chloe’s style, but the blue rebel was getting really ahead of herself. Friendly, simple, impossible to accept. “You know it’s too much. Don’t put yourself in the middle again.”

Pressing against the load was the only reasonable thing to do. Chloe caught it up, and they got it out surprisingly easy. “No offense, we are not buddies material right now.” She pointed out a bit too bitterly. “Not that we were for a long time.”

“Are you talking about this thing with Max?” Still unsure if this particular name should be mentioned at all, the blue pirate bit her lip. Well, that was the reason they stopped talking though, so it was better to get back to the basics and be done with it. Max was doing way better now, slowly getting over the breakup. Striving for revenge wasn’t in her nature anyway, and she for sure wouldn’t like to see Steph homeless or worse. It was more than ordinary to offer her some help if needed, even if Chloe preferred not to think about any possible messed up consequences and never-ending conversation with Rachel. Damn, she would hand Steph her last shirt if asked, always willing to give and worry about it later. The idea that Kris could help with a place to stay didn’t even cross her mind. “You know it was never an issue and it’s fucking history, alright? Don’t gift yourself with more enemies, huh?”

“Max needs you more, and you are the only person who keeps her in one piece. I don’t want you to
be in trouble. And she…” Strangely enough, Steph looked like she was about to cry. Chloe narrowed her eyes, but it was too dark to read her face and say it for sure. Maybe it was just the heavy load and tons of sweat. “It’s better for us to stay away.” And she escaped into the van again.

The blue rebel tilted her head thinking. Always straight-forward and independent, her friend was obviously hiding something, and it wasn’t just about the past with Max and stuff. It wasn’t cool that they broke up, but it wasn’t malicious or anything. People split sometimes, and both parties involved in this case were her people. However, Steph seemed scared, hiding like a turtle in its shell or getting aggressive every time somebody tried to talk some sense into her. At first, Chloe assumed that it was because of her friendship with Max, but by now everything should get back to normal. Sure, the little freckle was the pirate’s best friend and always came first, but Steph was important too, even if in a very complicated way.

So, there was only one reasonable explanation.

“You still care about her, don’t you?” Chloe asked gently, tangling her beanie in her sweaty hands, feeling how sticky her fingers had become. A light chuckle shouldn’t count as a valid response, but it somehow did. Apparently, Max wasn’t easy to forget, even if she wasn’t the one who cut the ties. Damn. Feeling oddly uncomfortable and not sure what to do, the pirate looked around for another thing to lift or pull. Physical work seemed way more alluring. Easy. “Don’t worry about my punk ass pinched by the fence.” Picking one of the smaller boxes she started dragging it to the entrance but continued talking. “I get what you’re doing, but you split your people like goods or wealth after a divorce. You helped me tons, and I’m not just an asshole who will forget such a thing.” The stupid container didn’t want to move, so Chloe simply kicked it, and the pain in her foot almost knocked her down. “What the fuck you have in there?”

“Tools. Fragile.”

“Here.” Finally getting the crate out, the blue anxiety put her beanie back on, done with unloading shit. Fuck this party if they couldn’t even help with those things. “This tool ain’t changing sides because there ain’t any.” She poked her own chest. “You don’t need my help, it’s fine, but if you ever feel that something ain’t right, you can just shoot me up with a text or shit. And I’m not only talking about a place to stay.”

The last sentence pierced the silence, disturbed only by the club’s stifled uproar and rustle of tall pines circling the parking lot. It resonated between the clouds of breaths, quick pants and squeals of the old, creaky van, demanding a reaction. Steph remained quiet though, not moving and still finding her solace among the shadows thinking intensely if Chloe knew more than she wanted to say. Was it that obvious? Was it that clear?

“What do you mean?” She whispered.

“Dating Kris Prescott has a certain flavor in this town,” Chloe shrugged, sniffing a bit. Getting sweaty in the winter cold was always awarding her with an itchy throat. At least she had plans for the rest of the month then. Dope. “And I don’t want to be a canary in a coal mine, but some people will be up your ass pretty soon, Victoria included, as you could see like a minute ago.”

Relieved and tormented at the same time, Steph got out smashing the back door and officially finishing operation unload. Then, walking close to her blue friend, she looked her straight in the eye.

“What do you want me to do, Chloe? Get back in my closet?” Her voice was low and calm but filled by anger. Getting livid out of nowhere was yet another thing people around her had to get used to, and she was about to give Chloe some taste. “Pretend that there is nothing between Kris and me? Like it would work, huh? Everybody knows by now, and I can’t be bothered with what people think
of us.” The blue pirate almost got pushed, even if she was the last to blame. It surprised them both. “Blackwell never spoke highly of me anyway. And when it comes to Kris’s family…” Steph didn’t even remember when she worried about this issue last time. Probably in her previous, happy life or something. “Sean Prescott can suck my dick. I’m not underage anymore, and whatever she did, it was a long time ago and not relevant. Plus, her father is embracing his inner professional golfer on the green pastures of Florida, and her mom doesn’t mind.”

All of this was true. Well, except this dick sucking thing. Steph didn’t care about Prescotts anymore, she didn’t want to, and that was part of her problem. Warned so many times that this family was an equivalent to a hornets’ nest, she got used to it quickly and even adapted in some way, avoiding certain topics, places, and people. In some way, she wouldn’t mind to even be confronted by Kris’s father and speak her mind freely. Why not? That would burn some bridges, but it was better than seeing them sizzling slowly.

Did she really want to finish it?

Did she?

With her hands shaking, she looked at her phone, checking if Kris didn’t text her in the meantime. As always, her mobile was put on silent while she was working though, perhaps she had missed something. No, not a word, not a single message, nothing. It didn’t help to calm her down, now with this maddening, well-known thought to return with full force. Her current relationship couldn’t be a mistake though, Steph corrected herself in a second. It couldn’t be.

“And her brother is fucking nuts.” Apparently, the blue pirate was as clueless as a five-year-old wandering through a dark forest though. Mentioning Nathan, who was not even around much, didn’t bother Steph either. If Chloe wanted to strike a chit-chat about this clan of assholes, it was more than a safe ground though. Way safer than Max. “You’re playing with fire there.” The blue pirate added.

“What are you trying to say?” Steph turned back to her.

At this point, the old Chloe Price, a high-school dropout and a girl without a future would just walk away, angry and disappointed. She would never look back, call or even say hi to Steph again, but write some pathetic, stupid, letters, expressing how much she was damn upset. The new one didn’t move an inch, except reaching for a fresh, new smoke. Her friend needed her, even if she was acting off, full stop. The blue rebel couldn’t figure out why exactly things turned out that way but wasn’t gonna disappear until some things would be said. Or stated.

“That if some shit goes south give me a call because you aren’t alone.” She responded so calmly that she wanted to pat herself on the back. “Even if sometimes it could feel like it.”

A cold shiver ran through Steph’s spine. The blue pirate nailed it, subconsciously or not. Even if they didn’t talk for weeks now, it was more than evident that something was wrong. Chloe had to know that Steph was feeling like shit but wasn’t up for grilling her for all the details. How, why and what led to it was kinda secondary for the blue rebel, who was always oriented on one thing only - making people who she cared about to feel better. Thankfully this tall, bold badass would never press Steph to do or say something she didn’t want to. A real friend, who was willing to put some things behind for the sake of saving her ass. Steph was damn close to just give up and tell her how everything looked like, but then something in her mind twitched, and she found herself unable to do so.

“South? We’re as much North as in Canada now and won’t split.” Lying had never come so easily before, but was way heavier than a load of amps, crates, and cables. “She would never do that.”

A deep sigh was followed by even deeper silence. Tired of this constant fight, the blue pirate shifted
her arms not sure if her advice nor presence was indeed needed. To be frank, she imagined this talk way differently, not hoping for a smooth chit-chat, but didn’t assume a mood-swinging shitstorm. Seeing her friend being so angry and unsure was just too damn shocking. Getting to the bottom of this was beyond Chloe Price’s capabilities though. Being social and shit wasn’t a bad thing, but she wasn’t great at this, like really.

“Breaking up is not the worst thing that can happen.” She stated simply.

One sentence and this terrible feeling in her stomach appeared again. Stubborn, blue asshole was here regardless, having her back and supporting her, even if she had to go through hell and back with Max. Steph knew what kind of advice Chloe would give her. Leave this Prescott girl, get back on track, smoke some good shit, maybe even have a coffee with her freckled friend. She could hear her saying it, already imagining the pauses and accent on certain words. Breaking up was the easiest solution though, way more manageable than dealing with a complicated, thorny relationship. A solution that Steph wasn’t ready for, always too loyal and too committed to just surrender. It wasn’t even about being alone, single or whatever, but losing yet another chance for happiness was something she couldn’t deal with. Falling to pieces inside, Steph clicked her tongue not sure of what to say and how to now break into tears with the first word spoken.

“Damn, you really fucking grew up.” She finally mumbled, picking up a few loose nails and noticing her hand was still bleeding.

“Tons of booze and sex do it to people. And if some shit gonna hit the fan, if Victoria will try to fucking mess with you or any other fuckwit, you know how to reach me.” Chloe sniffled again, feeling the cold getting to her for real. “Better me than Max.”

“Max…” It felt so good to say her name. Way too good. Steph bit her lip. “Does she know about all of this? Like you talking to me, offering me a place to crash and…”

“Who do you think I am, Steph?” It was time for the blue rebel to scoff. Including her best friend in this would be more than an innocent mistake and she really hoped this topic wouldn’t be brought back. Seemingly, it was the only thing that Steph wanted to talk about, even if opening her mouth and expressing herself with more than just sighs and mumbles wasn’t something she was very much into. Jesus Christ, those girls. “Of course she doesn’t. I ain’t gonna mess her up with your stuff or your lack of problems. Buddies don’t act like that. Best friends neither.”

Max wouldn’t mind though, too fucking busy getting into school life and making up for the lost years. It was okay, but recently Chloe got a bit worried about her friend though. Not like deadly worried or to the level of wanting to talk her out of hanging out with those dickheads, but it was freaking strange. Yeah, sure, she needed more buddies and it was about time for the little freckle to lash out a bit to have this so-called college experience. Arcadia didn’t offer like a tremendous choice with that kind of entertainment either making them to choose between Vortex or former Bowers’ crew, partying way more hardcore. Still odd. Moreover, Rachel also started to attend those events way more often, this time demanding her pirate’s company to avoid even a hint of suspicion that drugs or weird shit were about to happen. Reluctantly, Chloe agreed, even if she couldn’t even get high or drunk that much, so it was kinda pointless. Guarding her like a hawk, her blonde angel wanted her by her side but wasn’t allowing any weird shenanigans occurring, barking back at the blue pirate's fan club, which surprisingly, was still around. So, drama, no dope and Tori the bitch making their lives harder. No surprise that more or less those parties were shit though, and Chloe missed the time when her girl spent more time babbling about stupid art with this photography teacher, instead of wasting their time with the bunch of assholes. Mark Jefferson evaporated from their existence though, not really brought back in the conversations and she never quite understood why. Perhaps Rachel just got bored.
So yeah, Vortex shit, yay.

Wasn’t that something Chloe wanted though? Rachel was a natural born social butterfly and needed other people around, naturally striving for the limelight, this time including her wife in it. Cool, the blue pirate never wanted to jail her in the four walls of their room, but damn, why even go there if you couldn’t get more than two beers?

“Noble.” She heard Steph saying.

“If you wanted to offend me, you forgot how this game plays out.” Chloe sighed. So Max, Rachel, Vortex and then Steph. Because life couldn’t be just nice and easy, right?

The club’s door squeaked again, and somebody ran out, yelling and giggling. The party got into its essential stage, or so it seemed. Lurking at her watch, Steph concluded that she didn’t have that much time left. They had to rush to prepare everything for the rock concert scheduled at 10 pm, when everybody would be drunk enough to stomach the half-baked songs but still at least half-sober to enjoy it. Thankfully, not much was left to do, so technically they could just chill and talk.

Working would be better.

“How is she…” Stuttering, Steph found Chloe’s piercing look too hard to bare. “Does she…” Saying the name was a dangerous idea. This thought appeared again anyway though. This throbbing, annoying, impossible dream was still there. “Does she mention me?”

“What do you think?” The gentle response came at once. Chloe straightened up putting her hands in her pockets and enjoying the chilly breeze. Damn, this talk was heated. Her voice became dreamier, as if the blue mind wandered into a different territory, recalling a few break downs and harsh discussions with her best friend. Max… Well, Max was still in love with this stupid, working her ass off asshole. Max was doing fine though, trying to forget, finally learning how to smile again. Max… “She will be alright though, get her shit together and find somebody just right for her. Just like…” She waved at this new expensive watch Steph was wearing. “You did, I guess. Speaking of, any plans for tonight?” It was better to change the topic. Just in case. “Anything special? Before you ask, I won’t pass this info to Max either.”

Not entirely sure if she ever wanted to celebrate this holiday, Steph got quiet again, almost entirely forgetting that she was about to meet Kris later. So used to being sidelined, she didn’t even prepare a lot for today, not very much in a festive mood. Who knew, they might have a nice time after all. Maybe. Perhaps. Hopefully. If Prescotts’ duty would allow.

“Well, standard things.” She answered reluctantly. “Romantic ride in my filthy van. Not very high class but I told her I can’t fly to Europe twice a month.” Chloe nodded like it was entirely normal for such trips to happen. Paris got boring if visited so often, everybody knew that. “So yeah. Flowers, dinner, secret beach spot.”

The pirate grinned and punched her arm. Now they were talking.

“Just be careful not to snatch mine or don’t unleash any dragons there. I like my beach how it is; it doesn’t need a reload.”

“Why is it that every time I see you two, you’re talking about breathing fire?” Said Rachel who appeared almost of nowhere and was slowly walking towards them. It was hard to tell if she listened for a moment and didn’t want to disturb, or just showed up at the right time.

Well, not the latter. Chloe knew her girl had to eavesdrop a bit. Old habits die hard.
“Because we sense your presence?” She reached for her hand and pulled closer for a forehead kiss. “Hi there, beautiful. Got bored waiting?”

Rachel rolled her eyes. Apparently irritated, she gasped with fury, clearly showing that this party wasn’t going as smoothly as she had expected. To be honest, even being here was a mistake, but she needed to kill some time before the Valentine’s date she had carefully planned. It was easier to hide things with a beer in her hand and hitting the dancefloor than sitting in one room with a big, persistent, blue question. Chloe’s allergy for surprises was legendary though and she would try everything to get all the info at once, not leaving anything for later. Rachel couldn’t blame her girl but this time she had spent a lot of time and effort to cook up something special and needed to keep her distracted and clueless. It didn’t go quite that well, mostly because she miscalculated how annoying Victoria Chase could be, especially if single, alone, and bitter as a rotten pickle.

Good thing Mark wasn’t here tonight.

“Got annoyed waiting. This party wasn’t that bad until Tori showed up. No, baby.” She stopped her blue fury who roared like an angry sealion and was about to run back to the club. Judging from the quick quarrel with Victoria she experienced inside, Chloe had already gone through at least one battle with the fashion lizard. The next one could end up in a disaster like drowning this bitch in a beer can or something. “We really don’t want to risk you being expelled and it’s the only bar in town not asking many questions about your ID or age.” A quick kiss always helped to calm down the storm. It didn’t fail this time either.


“I hate when you speak to the logical part of me.” Chloe wrapped her arms around her, burying her face in the blonde hair, partly because she missed Rachel so much and, quite frankly, her nose got frozen and needed a warm-up. “Vicky tried here too, queen of freaking sluts. Can’t wait to graduate and never see Chase’s face ever again.”

Watching them so committed, so happy, so much together, was making Steph even more upset. She had no idea how those two remained inseparable against all the odds, but somehow, they managed to be constantly madly in love. It was like one fucking Instagram live stream with the happy couple’s adventures. Even if arguing, fighting, screaming or having a few bad moments, they always found each other, getting back and sealing themselves in an embrace. It seemed so easy though, like one of those fairy tales that never happened to ordinary people, and somehow Chloe Price and Rachel, now Price as well, were sharing it. Just like that.

Lucky bastards.

“Not that it matters, but there is a rumor going around that Victoria has some shit planned up for the drama camp and it will be nasty.” Steph said slowly, recalling the gossips she had heard earlier this evening. Listening to the Vortex club assholes while hiding in her van paid off from time to time. “I didn’t hear the details though, but she’s really arming up so be very careful what you eat and drink there. She’s plotting something.”

The revealed secret didn’t make an impression at all. Chloe looked concerned a bit, but Chase always liked to stir some shit and complicate things for everybody around. Surprisingly, Rachel didn’t even bat an eye, either too used to it or already knowing about the probably stupid as hell intrigue. Victoria had a very limited arsenal and imagination, either distributing embarrassing photos or videos, or just trying to spread some lies. As Chloe had said once, it would be better for her to spread her legs at least once, so she would experience something nice and hopefully change her attitude. A mean comment, but Rachel had almost breathed in her coffee laughing hard.
“Neat.” She shrugged, not really worried. To be honest, she didn’t give a flying fuck about this trip, but it was too soon to reveal why. “I have it covered, but thanks. She can shit herself with my blessing, using all the tricks in her little witchcraft book. I really appreciate the warning though.”
Nodding she noticed how thin and stressed Steph looked. This girl was in some serious shit. “There are not many people who have my back.”

“Well, I do.” Gandalf the gay chuckled. “We do.” She corrected herself, including Kris in the not so far-fetched statement. Her girlfriend liked these two, or so she was saying. “Be careful. Bitch is up to something.”

The lighter clicked when Rachel lit up her smoke and took the first long inhale.

“Or was up to something.” She sighed, recalling one other evil thing that Victoria probably had done or influenced. It was just a small suspicion though, kinda absurd and ridiculous, without any evidence whatsoever. Nothing for sure, but Rachel was damn close to believe in it. “It’s not the first time she tried to tangle with the precious line of my destiny. Tori should try to find a job at Disney and not necessarily as a princess.”

Chloe’s eyes grew bigger when she was slowly absorbing the meaning behind the statement.

“Wait, do you think she was behind your Harvard thing?” That would make perfect sense. The pirate had no idea what Chase would’ve done but it was now clear that this bitch was to blame for Rachel being rejected. If so, Victoria would fucking pay. Like now. Be my Valentine got an entirely new meaning indeed. “I’m gonna kill her with my bare hands.” Grabbing one of the cables, Chloe turned back ready to spank this fashion devil, preferably in front of others.

Unfortunately, she got stopped.

“Chill baby and leave this cable alone.” Rachel chuckled, still holding her jacket. Considering a joke that bare hands usually didn’t include a cable, she took the murder weapon out of the pirate’s fingers and threw it aside, not bothered to roll it up. “Do you seriously think that Chase had any power to do anything or influence a decision of one of the oldest and the most respected academic facilities on this planet? Plus, it doesn’t matter anymore. Harvard is hella pretentious anyway so perhaps it’s for the best? I can’t say I’m joyful about how things turned out, but I ain’t gonna cry either. Anyway, where’s Kris?” Looking around she turned to Steph.

“Hell if I know.” Shrugging, the exasperated stage manager lurked at her phone. Still no messages, no info, no unanswered calls. Probably the super-duper important meeting got extended. “She’s probably planning something.” She grabbed the thrown-out cable and started rolling. It felt like it was done at least a thousand times today.

“Judging by your face, she’s planning to be late,” Rachel concluded mercilessly, despite Chloe’s warning murmur. Oh, so there was a problem in paradise. Interesting. Steph looked depressed without question though, and even if a joke about awesome sex life should’ve followed, it didn’t seem to fit. Noticing the blood on her hand Rachel quickly came closer, offering a tissue and muttering something about useless pirates.

“Well, she’s busy,” Steph explained weakly, accepting the gift and warping her hand again. “Since her father let her take over a few things she’s always on some business call and shit, especially with this New York charity. Anyway, what about you guys? Anything spectacular planned for today?”

Talking about this valentine shit served as a perfect distraction when the conversation was turning in a very bumpy road. Not to mention, Rachel was way too smart. Avoiding dwelling on the situation with Kris would be very short-lived if this blonde bullshit detector was involved.
“Oh, you know,” Chloe winced, entirely not aware about the blonde smirk. To be honest, she didn’t plan much for today, assuming that the Vortex party she was dragged to was enough. This and some late night special later. She scratched her waist, weirdly trotting in place. “We married couples do not celebrate.”

Pretending like she was drastically offended, and actually being a bit, Rachel bumped her arm lightly.

“Sure, we do, it’s just kinkier.”

“Kinky, huh?” That caught the blue trouble’s attention to that level that she forgot about the whole conversation, Steph’s presence, Max’s new friends and everything else. “What’s on your mind? Now, I’m intrigued.” She tried to pull her wife closer, but Rachel snuck out from her arms not keen on sharing her secrets. Not yet.

“Not that we have a banging van to our disposal, but I’ll try to top that.” A nice pat on the white metal came across as nonchalant, but Chloe knew her girl very well and was damn sure that whatever Rachel organized for tonight would top a bajillion vans. She got really interested now, sensing something seriously big and that made her feel terrible since she didn’t really bother with this pink holiday that much. She never had.

“What are you planning, Rach?” Chloe mumbled pressing her girl against the van and ignoring how rude it had to be for Steph around. “A banging wagon?” Her hand immediately traveled to Rachel’s waist pulling her hips closer. She got jokingly pushed back, but it would never discourage the brave pirate.

“Maybe.” Her angel challenged her with her head up and hoping for a quick kiss.

The blue eyebrow furrowed. When her blonde devil set her mind on something it was extremely difficult to change the outcome, and now this little mischief was very determined to keep her secrets as long as she pleased. Well, fine. Shit, not fine. Chloe wanted to know now. Some years of experience taught her one thing though. If she wanted some information, usually a bold distraction would probably do the job. It wouldn’t hurt to try then.

“Be careful, I can always go all Long Beach on you,” Chloe whispered brushing her lips with her thumb and then burying her fingers in the blonde locks. “I might even have the handcuffs somewhere. Maybe.”

Oh, it worked. It worked better than the blue provocation had assumed. Half-open lips, narrowed eyes, and a very quiet sigh that came close to a moan told Chloe that her girl just imagined this possibility and was damn near to taking those words as a promise. The blue pirate almost turned red, knowing for a fact that she would never be able to recreate this very intimate moment in California when her lack of cooperation in the bedroom department and stubbornness got punished in a very unique way. Well, not exactly punished. More like awarded but with a twist? Anyway, not that she didn’t want to do it, but it was just too much even for a brave pirate. In reality though, there were no obstacles for her imagination to fly into this field, and actually Rachel was able to read her mind quite quickly. Her moves became slower, her breath faster and cheeks got flushed, as she uncovered this vision piece by piece. There was no secret she would do a lot actually to see her blue pirate in that situation.

Hell, no.

“Long beach? What’s that?” Steph blinked.
“It’s an inside joke,” Chloe responded at once, not willing to go into details and reminding herself that they weren’t alone. Hell, she came here to talk to her buddy and a few hazel sparks later she completely ignored Steph’s existence. Great job, one more time. Rachel ran her fingers through her hair trying to hide her own blush, distracted as well. The blue pirate chuckled and turned to her girl. “Will it be fun? Or criminal?” She asked, trying to navigate the ship of awkwardness into less stormy waters.

“Criminally fun.” Rachel winked but ignored the burning question in her wife’s eyes still not selling herself out. “No, you will learn all about it when the time comes and, according to this famous Arcadia Bay tradition you will be properly kidnapped and have to obey my power.”

“What kind of tradition is it?” Chloe frowned.

“The kinky one that I just came up with.” Her blonde angle shrugged, making this stuff up on the fly. “I’m just gonna take you to a charming, nostalgic and dark place where you will be able to free yourself in any way possible and listen to my commands.”

“TMI.” Steph said gloomily, still trying to stop the bleeding.

Rachel felt bad. Knowing that something had to be terribly not right with the DND queen’s private life, this whole semi make-out session had to come across as bad-mannered at best, and hurtful and uncomfortable at worst.

“Sorry.” She smirked and quickly got back to her pirate, who also looked embarrassed. “Be careful with your hands, baby.” Kissing the blue fingers was a supposedly innocent gesture but got taken with a sharp inhale. “You’ll need them.”

She was apparently hinting at Steph’s injury, but the blue temptation already forgot about the world around them. It always happened so quickly. One kiss led to another, one smile changed into a moan, and then they were both thinking about one thing only. It was Valentine’s day for crying out loud though, some surprises were already lined up, and Chloe was more than ready to start the rest of the night.

“Thank you for sharing all our secrets, Rach.” It was the only thing that she could’ve articulated not expressing how much the presence of anybody else was bothering her now. It wasn’t her fault though. Rachel started it.

Her fault.

“I’m not ratting out anything extraordinary.” Standing on her tiptoes, her angel kissed her cold nose and then looked at her watch. Well, it was time anyway. Thank God. “Alright, if Steph doesn’t mind, the kidnaping procedure is about to start now. Ready?”

“You are never ready for a surprise, I guess.” Came the unsure blue whisper. Chloe looked around hoping that everything got prepared and her friend wouldn’t have to deal with heavy shit without any help. Steph just nodded, confirming that she was indeed done and they were good to go. Her presence here was delayed anyway, and it was time to drive back home.

And meet Kris. Hopefully.

“That’s the spirit. Good luck tonight, Steph. For real.” Rachel’s warm smile was probably one of the nicest things that happened to Gandalf the gay recently. “And take care of your hand.”

She was considering giving Steph a good solid hug, cheer her up a bit, but it was probably the worst time and place for it. Promising herself to call her back soon, Rachel wrapped her arm around her
girl’s waist already consumed by the upcoming plans and unable to focus or do anything else. It was Chloe’s fault anyway, always freaking sidetracking her, just great. Damn, this pirate would be the death of her or her social skillset in general.

She could always solve this issue tomorrow.

“Thanks, guys. I really appreciate it.” Steph tried to smile back but failed. Promising to catch up with them later she waved leaning against the unpacked load. “I really do.” She repeated watching them walking quickly to the parking lot.

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“Caulfield?” Victoria blinked getting used to the dim light, barely recognizing the slim figure standing by the window. The second floor of the club was often less occupied, even if offering a few comfortable couches and a spectacular view of the bay. Designed for those who would like to take a short break from a loud blast of music and the tight, hurdling horde, this space was available, following a strict no smoking policy though, which drove most of the attendees off forcing them to go outside. Instead of a cozy background, it felt more like a haunted ghost lair. “Is that you?” The uneven wooden floor squeaked under the high heels when Victoria took one step, then another. The eerie aura was really getting to her now, even if the person in the front of her had to be Caulfield. Fuck, she really put her reputation in jeopardy today. First Gingrich, then this. Still, some company was better than nothing and today Victoria felt oddly alone. And bored of course. Two words, same outcome. “What are you doing here? Trying to have fun?” She started quite truculently, grasping her fingers on the tall wine glass.

This place was the negation of fun though.

“Aren’t we all?” Max leaned over the window staring at the waves crashing in a tide, cutting down the horizon with one sharp line. Not ignoring nor bothered by her presence she seemed relaxed and composed, taking yet another break from the mess downstairs. Even if recently very active in certain social circles, Max still kept her distance, shunning and attracting people at the same time. Her glass was still half-full, and Victoria didn’t have to ask to know it contained a minor amount of alcohol. The little freckle, even if changing her ways, didn’t jump into getting drunk as a skunk every time liquor was around, and was keeping things slow and kinda classy. At least one person knew how to have fun.

“It has to be difficult since you’re the single one here,” Victoria stated, taking a place by her side and enjoying the view as well. The sharp, high-pitched gusts of wind mixed with the pent-up rhythm of the music felt like two worlds colliding, luring and repelling one another. A more intimate, sheltered and private tide. The Blackwell queen realized that they hadn’t really talked much, even if Vortex activities became a common interest for both, avoiding each other out of respect, not a must. Still, it was somehow relaxing to have her around, just as if Caulfield had this special magic power of calming everybody down, evaporating the routine anxiety and angst.

Max smiled sadly. A desperate need of finding a new partner, so widespread among others, wasn’t something she burdened herself with. Hanging out with the garish crew helped her to patch up the holes of loneliness, but building any kind of close relation seemed unmanageable at the moment. Learning from her experience, first going crazy with Chloe, then ruining everything with Steph, she had decided to focus on herself, and then, maybe, perhaps, hopefully, the right person would appear. Even the lovely-dovely theme of today’s celebration wasn’t really perturbing her, as she worked out
the patience to look at the other couples without a huge dragon-hunter-shaped hole in her heart opening up at once. Some were lucky to have each other now; she might be fortunate later.

Or never.

“Are you talking from experience?” Looking at Victoria, she took a sip of her drink. The Blackwell queen wasn’t really an enemy anymore, not a friend and certainly not neutral. The more Max learned about her, catching up with tons of gossips and a rare few solid facts, the more she understood the blind persistence and constant prying. Understanding didn’t mean accepting though. “Actually, it’s quite the opposite.” Another sip. Max stretched out a bit. “I’m having a very nice time. Don’t force me to repeat it in the past tense, please.” She winced, recalling that Chase had a tendency of maneuvering into very mean and dark territories, especially if disappointed with herself.

And damn, she had been, since Nathan.

“Why would you assume so?” Shrugging but still alert and ready to switch into battle mode, Victoria mirrored her moves, testing her martini in a tall, proper glass. Probably the only not chipped goblet in this shithole and reserved only for her. “I really don’t hold any grudge against any of you and have no bad intentions whatsoever. People are quick to judge me, especially when I’m being honest.”

The little freckle couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Your honesty is walking two steps ahead of you, Victoria.” She said watching the dark shape of Arcadia Bay’s landscape, and with an ironic smirk lingering on her lips. “Everybody knows how sincere you are. I’m not judging you though. I know it’s hard to have fun when everybody talks about being in love or…” Seeing Steph today was harder than Max thought. It took her two long inhales to finish the sentence. “…together.”

Dwelling on her own mistakes could be deadly, so she tapped her glass’s side quickly trying to find a perfect distraction. Chloe kept telling her that small steps and keeping her mind busy would be a good way to get back on track. Fake it till you make it was Rachel’s advice. Both worked in a carefully balanced combination. To obtain this equilibrium though, Max had had to give up sitting in her room alone, with Netflix on, or a book she couldn’t read anyway, fenced by things that belonged to somebody else, hoping to hear a well-known knock on the door. Different faces, voices, and vents about problems she wasn’t really involved with, were shockingly helping. Hence, Vortex. Next in line was understanding why this Blackwell queen was so desperate to rule her kingdom built out of gossip and blather. Somebody’s drama was always better than the personal, inner one. A perfect distraction.

“Thank you.” Surprisingly enough Victoria didn’t take up the gauntlet. Against all odds, recently this girl changed in her eyes from a disposable human being into somebody who in different circumstances could become a friend. Or a servant. Two words, same outcome. “Speaking of single ladies, have you heard from Kate? I was told she will come back next semester.” After a prolonged moment of silence, Victoria desperately tried to find a topic not built on shaky ground. There weren’t many.

The wooden floor whined under Max’s feet when she changed her position, thinking about the response. Not that she was really afraid that Chase would sell out some secrets, but Kate Marsh was one more reminder of good old times that faded away with time, like an old photograph kept in the sunlight. Now, this secluded place felt even more like a ghost chasing theme park.

“I don’t think she will, Victoria.” She responded slowly, remembering her last talk with Kate. Poor soul was still blaming herself for what had happened, and no logical arguments could change her mind. It was better for her to stay away. “Too many bad memories and too many traumas. She
prefers to stick to what she knows at the moment, even if it means to sabotage her own chances. People prefer the well-known hell from the unknown heaven. It doesn’t mean that we have to make this hell more unbearable.” Building a bit of courage, she took another long sip and asked: “Why do you hate Rachel so much?”

The line of Arcadia Bay was pitch black. Weird shapes of homes and trees created one coherent line against the blue, dark sky. Even the throbbing pulse of the club fit the scenery, as the stars seemed to blink with the rhythm of the music, lighting up and tarnishing down with every low beat played.

“I don’t hate her.” Her response was calm and serene, just like this fight wasn’t hers anymore or, despite the recent events, Victoria didn’t care that much. Maybe it was just an act, or the secretly hidden truth. “I just don’t think she deserves what she has.” She explained, still glaring at the firmament and wetting her lips on the Martini.

“She doesn’t have anything except Chloe and a few perks of being good looking and witty. Nothing you should be jealous of.”

“I’m not jealous.” Frowning, Victoria tried to smile, but somehow it didn’t happen. As always when she failed at something, she grew a bit tense. “She just plays on my nerves and messing up with her is entertaining. What are you?” Battle mode finally kicked in. “Her public affairs office? Is it some kind of pussy licking comradeship?” Hitting at gay had gotten out of style a long time ago, but it was the only strike she could think of.

“There isn’t any.” The harsh provocation didn’t really make any impression on Max, who didn’t even care to shrug. Victoria’s sudden outbursts of anger were as usual as rain mist in the Pacific Northwest. Uncomfortable but usual. “She’s my best friend’s wife, but I’m not one of her groupies. Burn the hatchet, Victoria. Why can’t you just drop it? You are too smart and this beef’s too old for both of you to keep going.”

The dark silhouettes of pines, firs and cedars danced to their breaths, the panting beat and the floor’s squeaks, when Victoria decided to walk away, then changed her mind and then got back and forth a few times. She didn’t come here to talk about Amber, even if she couldn’t grasp the reason why she was still here. Talking to Max about it could have severe consequences like finally revealing that in fact, Victoria really didn’t have anything serious against Rachel, especially after learning more about her troubled past. Since Chloe’s wife separated herself from Jeffrey and failed with her Harvard endeavor, she should’ve become more of a laughing stock than an enemy. Moreover, it was silly to persistently pick on her, but changing Victoria’s demeanor was simply too complicated. There were a few sure things in this world though. The taxes that Victoria’s parents were avoiding, death that she really didn’t care about especially after being as old as 30, and her war with the blonde slut. That’s how it was supposed to be until somebody would win.

Fun. It was just simply fun, right?

It wasn’t something she could tell Max though. “If I didn’t know you, Caulfield, I would think it was a pickup line.” Victoria sneered, trying to find some solid answers between the shapes and shadows outside. Then she tensed up yet again, afraid that there was some truth to this statement.

“How do you want it to be a pickup line?” This time Max Caulfield couldn’t hide a smile.

In a second a cold, curious silence embraced them both in a tense grip. The beat from downstairs intensified as they watched each other, holding their breaths. More Victoria than Max though, since the little freckle was either close to laughing out loud or… Well, it was better not to ponder about the other option, especially on Valentine’s.
“Are you suggesting something, Max?” She asked sharply, trying to save the rest of her studied
dignity.

Caufield looked like she wanted to say something deadly dangerous, but then closed her mouth
shielding herself with her drink. That was probably why people drank that much on those parties. A
nice alternative to biting your tongue.

“I’m just messing with you, it’s entertaining.” She shook her head instead. “Like you said earlier,
you would never fall so low anyway.” Quoting the words aimed at Chloe earlier felt a bit like a far-
fetchetd self-defense, but nontoxic for them both. “Enjoy your evening, Victoria.” She finished her
drink, put her empty glass on the table and headed back to the staircase. “Have fun.”

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“Careful.” Rachel’s fingers tightened on her shoulder, holding her in place and probably protecting
from falling. It was hard to tell since Chloe couldn’t see anything, putting all her trust in her girl’s
hands, sinking in mud, stumbling upon roots and being hit in the face by random, mean branches.
This whole surprise thing was getting out of hand though. First, Rachel demanded to drive her own
car, breaking the rule that the pirate would take over the wheel in exchange for attending this Vortex
shit-together. Second, the road ended up in the middle of nowhere and Chloe’s eyesight got covered
as part of the supposedly fantastic bombshell. She was damn fine with it until she learned it also
required walking into the freaking forest. Third, the blue complaint had been dragged, yanked and
hauled for a good fifteen minutes now, losing her hope for a cozy evening with a bubble bath and
some pink shit like that. At first she tried everything in her power to make Rachel’s life harder,
moving around with the grace of a sack of potatoes, hoping to annoy her to the point that the
blindfold would be taken off, but apparently the plans for tonight were set in stone and absolutely
nothing would change her wife’s mind. Dropping to her knees would be a weak way to get her point
across, so Chloe got a grip and tried to cooperate, surrendering to the blonde will. Her only hope was
that this trip would take a few more minutes, not hours.

So far, her girl was doing great with being watchful for both of them, even if swearing, mumbling
and sometimes making fun of the blue lack of balance. Not in an unkind way though, but still
infuriating since it wasn’t easy to walk through the dark, thick woods with the eyes obscured.
Huffing, puffing, sweating and gasping they were making progress though, moving step by step in
the grave, dense silence.

Suddenly, a low scream of an owl pierced the peaceful quietness scaring them both to death. Chloe
groaned, trying to take another step relying only on her instinct and tripped again.

“Got ya!” She heard Rachel whispering; this time seriously concerned. They were on the verge of
ending up in a deep ravine then, dead and forgotten, circled only by angry, evil birds laughing at
their misfortune. What a way to celebrate this rare, cute holiday. “We’re almost there, baby.” Chloe
got kissed and pulled forward. “Just hold my hand, alright?”

Scratching her ass and more annoyed than curious, the blue rebel followed, wondering why she had
to marry a woman so mysterious and damn secretive. Couldn’t they just stay at the party? The dorm?
Damn, even get creative in Rachel’s car now left at the secluded, empty parking lot not used in years.
Like anywhere but this?

“Are you sure you picked the right way to celebrate?” The timberland jungle wasn’t usually the most
welcoming place in the area but now seemed even more frightening, discovered only by sounds and noises. The owl didn’t want to shut up, the leaves rustled in a chilling, bloodcurdling way and the blue pirate was damn close to call this whole thing off. Better this than admitting this trip was damn creepy.

Fortunately, Rachel was holding her tight, protective as a hawk, ready to peck to death any other bird around, and that loving security was probably the best part of the journey. Her hand never left the blue palm, sometimes even squeezing it a bit too tight when the blonde angel got anxious, sometimes bruising the skin with her nails when petrified. Cute and all, but Chloe would really figure out a thousand different ways to use this blindfold in more inventive ways. “It’s not Halloween or some shit.” She mumbled when they started to walk down from a hill of some sort and could only hope the finish line was getting closer. Evidently, her prayers were listened, and Rachel finally stopped her with a tap to her arm. “Can I take it off?” And hearing a confident chuckle, the blue pirate finally tore off the blindfold. “Thank God.” She sighed and then looked around, totally staggered.

A train branch lined with locomotives, carts, and wagons expanded almost up to the horizon of the sylvan valley, disappearing into one single row of train tracks. Lit up by only a few flickering reflectors, dozens if not hundred trolleys were stamping to each other in a supposedly chaotic order, remaining still, drowned in silence and awaiting the signal from a dusty semaphore. Some of the trains looked abandoned though, tumbled-down, scrawled with graffiti, crumbled and eaten by time. Some others seemed good to go at any moment, with perfectly polished steel wheels and prepared to load. The flock of iron horses were asleep though and not very much guarded, as their isolation was a perfect security.

“Whoa. I haven’t been here for years,” said Chloe when they got closer and started to wander through the maze of tacks and wagons. “I thought your boner for public transport faded away with time. You want to ride this bad boy again?” She tapped one of the carriages, entirely forgetting about the need of getting back home or even changing their plans. Excited like a little kid, she tried to jump on one of them, then another, lurking through the windows and half-open doors, imagining the next big adventure.

“Yes. I did.” Damn serious, Rachel started walking through one of the track lines, using her phone as a flashlight and trying to read the bold, stenciled numbers. Scoffing and whispering to herself, she turned back a few times, picking a different hoop and then switching fast to another. Chloe’s puzzlement intensified. Obviously, there was more to it than just bunch of steel and iron to have fun with. After a long while, her blonde angel finally found what she was seeking, then checked something on her mobile, constantly glancing at the numbers. “Yeah. This one.” She prodded the sealed, heavy door of one of the most decent looking freight cars. “Do you think you can help me
to open it with your eyes closed?”

Probing the challenge, the blue pirate reached the handle, trying to move it with a few fingers, but it didn’t even budge. Obviously, it was on her, since the tiny and not that tall Rachel wouldn’t even be able to reach the opening mechanism. It had to be teamwork then. Well, to some extent of course. Rachel was standing there, smoking and scrolling through her phone, and her precious rebel was entrusted to drag some metal around. Great. Chloe had no idea that Valentine’s day was supposed to be jam-packed with heavy physical work. Why did people even look forward to this holiday? Ah, sex and cookies, not necessarily in that order. That was why.

Both threats seemed unlikely at the moment.

“You’re not making it easier, sunshine. Now I know why you wanted me to save my hands.” She grinned, obediently closing her eyes and rolling up her sleeves. The door looked like a damn piece of work, unspoiled and watertight. She pulled once, but nothing came out of it. The second, angrier yank give birth to a screeching squeal only. Sweating already, Chloe sighed and tried already, but then froze listening closely.

A loud rustle coming from nearby bushes made the blue heart almost jump out of her chest. “Fuck, did you hear it?” Scared that some railway rat might catch them, the blue pirate paused, but Rachel gestured her to continue. Strange, she was usually the first one to sense the danger, and now so absorbed by her phone, she looked like she owned this train. The blue rebel shrugged and got back to her labor. “Alright, almost…” Wheeze. Pull. Chloe gasped. “Almost.” Putting her foot against one of the rusted bolsters and changing the grip on the handle, she pulled again. The door slowly moved once, twice and finally opened up with a loud wheeze. “Here.” She announced and then looked inside.

Saying that her jaw dropped would be an understatement.

The inside of the freight car was lit by two dozen candles and its floor covered by checkered, warm blankets, inviting them both to lie down or just rest on one of the already prepared wooden containers. To make it even more cozy, and closer to Chloe’s taste, a massive box of pizza was already prepared in the center, accompanied by two wine glasses and a bottle of something that didn’t look like a soda. Cookies and chocolates were present as well, since no one would like to miss out on consuming a sick quantity of sugar. Everything had to be set up just minutes ago by some mystical creatures, magical elves or some railway dudes that Rachel bribed. Chloe preferred to imagine it was one of the first two options though. As with a drop of a magic wand, the inside of the wagon looked like an entirely new, enchanted world, carefully planned and prepared by this blonde devil who somehow had hidden all this from her pirate wife. Somehow.

“How... how did you do it?” Chloe turned to her.

Rachel grinned, hid her phone and jumped on board, scaring the candles’ flames, which moved nervously tangled by the sudden movement. The old wagon’s breaks squeaked when she walked around checking if everything was done correctly according to her order. It seemed that those two guys she hired did everything right, not wasting her money. Quite a relief since it would be a hardship to make a complaint about semi-legal service.

“I have my ways.” Sitting on one of the wooden boxes, Rachel leaned over making herself more comfortable. “Take your seat and enjoy.” She gesticulated towards the other crate hoping her faithful pirate would join her for yet another journey.

It took Chloe a moment of relearning basic body movements and speech abilities. Climbing inside, she still remained silent, shocked, amazed and startled not even by the surprise herself but the amount
of effort it must’ve taken to arrange this whole thing. And only because of this stupid pink holiday. Just because of them. Of her. Getting used to the fact that she was loved had taken the blue admiration forever, and every time she thought she got accustomed to it, and nothing would surprise her, something like that occurred. Clearing her drastically dry throat, Chloe walked around still fighting with this overwhelmed, stupid random shyness, discovering mostly empty space. Except the unreal picnic the wagon was bare and unfilled though, with a few very old crates and loose planks. The magic elves were too lazy to clear it up completely.

To her amazement, it was precisely the same freight car they had taken on their first ride, or date as Rachel liked to call it. The one that brought them both to the overlook and much further, turning their life around and teaching them how to jump off in the right moment. She quickly recognized it inspecting the drawings and carvings on the walls, a bit faded but still visible. The whole hobo code, a few stupid dates, words, names or initials. Praises for the Bigfoots and some love or fuck confessions. And their names too, somewhere around the left bottom corner of the door. How Rachel had even found this wagon and organized this evening was beyond Chloe. Way beyond.

“This is… just amazing.” She whispered still not believing her own eyes. “You really like to spoil me.”

“Spoiling us. I know how to prepare a decent kidnapping operation after all.”

“Spot on.” Chloe finally took her seat, lurking into this pizza box. It was still hot and steamy, ready to devour at any given time. “I’m surprised that you preferred to drag me here instead of one of your Vortex club things though.”

The last point was supposed to serve as an innocent joke, not a nasty grumble, but Rachel grew a little bit uneasy. She knew that her pirate wasn’t fond of their recent social activities but couldn’t develop the courage to explain why Vortex had become so important. It wasn’t only about spending time with others or shinning in the limelight, although it was nice to know some people still found her fabulous. It was somehow connected to Mark Jefferson, a secret that presumably couldn’t be discussed. Since the stressful photo session, Rachel was steering clear of her teacher, finding herself oddly lonely and striving for the company of others. Vortex assholes’ babble couldn’t hold the candle to their insightful and perceptive discussions, but it was at least something since facing Mark could be way too tense. He had tried to reconnect with her, explaining his attitude and even if she understood the cognitive, still wasn’t keen on getting back to almost daily meetings. The line had been crossed and would take more than a kind phone call to change it. Still, she missed him, and the best way to deal with this longing was lashing out. Not much though, just a bit, as they had been careful. Drugs, even if served on a silver plate, were out of the question even if tempting. Well, calling Mark back was also tempting.

Maybe Max was right. Perhaps this guy was bad news after all.

“Vortex is just for fun, this is different.” Opening the bottle and pouring the wine, she took a sip from her glass, hiding the bewilderment. “Nasty, bratty, bitchy me wanted you all for myself tonight and recreate something special, this time with a proper slant.” Then the hazel eyes got darker. “Our previous valentines weren’t that glorious, so I wanted to make up for it.”

“Please, don’t beat yourself up to death with it. It was alright.” Chloe sniffled, more than keen on forgetting the details of last year’s troubles. It didn’t matter in the long run, especially in a moment like this. “Our first Valentine’s was fucking awesome though.” She pointed out, recalling a way more cheerful reminiscence.
The blonde eyebrow furrowed.

“Are you talking about the part when my father almost caught you naked?”

“No, I’m talking about almost breaking my neck almost falling from your window afterward. Totally worth it though.” Grabbing the bottle of wine, the blue pirate glared at the label in disbelief. Not a big fan of this red piss, Chloe usually avoided spirits of that sort, but this time it would be a depravity to refuse. And it got served in a glass, real glass, not a plastic cup. Taking a sip and testing it at the tip of her tongue, Chloe finally started to get why some people really preferred this than whiskey.

“Damn, Rach. You really went overboard. Now I feel kinda bad for having something small for you.” Scratching her butt again and then reaching into one of her pockets, the blue pirate checked if the small, wrapped in a pink paper gift was still in place. Ending up empty-handed would be a severe crime now.

“Don’t be.” Rachel hid her smile behind the glass. “I got my gift anyway, and I’m looking forward to celebrating the ownership.”

Scratching intensified.

“Is this gift enough?”

“Are you starting again?” The blonde angel rolled her eyes.

“Hell, no.” Her pirate stretched a bit, moving her neck from left to right and straightened like a cat in the sunlight. No blue teddy bear routine, no running away with her gaze, but a pure, rebel challenge hidden under half-open eyelids. If Rachel didn’t know her better, she would assume it was a candid show off. Chloe winked confirming her deepest suspicion. This pirate had game, all the guns and ammo she was more than willing to use. Damn. Rachel wondered what this blue self-esteem had been grown on. Usually so anxious and apprehensive, her girl became bolder and surer of herself with every passing day, not only towards her wife but in general. Could it occur by proxy? “If having a nice Chloe is everything you’re asking for…”

She heard the blue purr that was always solemnly damaging her speech and summoning her into the pirate’s arms.

“Not everything, far from it.” Rachel resisted, at least for now, tasting more of the wine and grabbing a slice of pizza. “I strive for a lot of things. Although, some of them might be dangerous, or dark, or quite risky….” Chuckling she again recalled the last conversation with Mark. Wrong idea. It was better to forget about their last discussion about fate, destiny and a limited amount of choices.

At least for one evening.

“Risky?” Chloe decided that sitting at the edge of a wagon was far more comfortable than this box. Plus, it reminded her of the very first time. “Do you wanted us to jump off it again?”

“I arranged a jump-free ride this time,” came the blonde response muffled by chewed pizza. Evidently, Rachel was willing to give up her constant diet today. Cookies were next. “Your neck is way too precious to risk it.”

Chloe rose the glass to her girl and took another sip, hoping to be squeezed as a dish or somewhere between the deserts. The wine wasn’t very sweet, a bit sour, but tasty. Hell, this shit wasn’t that bad after all. Usually, Rachel didn’t let her drink anything stronger than Red Bull, still freaking out about last year and booze doodled in gallons. Thankfully, she dropped this attitude today, still not serving liquor in barrels, but letting them get slightly buzzed.

“I was more worried about your neck actually. I would never let you jump without a parachute
bigger than this freaking train. So, where are we going?” It was partly a joke since Chloe didn’t expect this train to move at all.

“Nowhere in particular.” Surprisingly enough, Rachel responded quite seriously. “North I guess, unless you have any preference. I can’t do much in that regard but if you really don’t like the destination…”

The blue finger beckoned her to sit by her side. Resisting didn’t work this time, so she followed and got immediately pulled closer and jailed in an embrace. Pizza could wait, cuddling not so much.

“The destination doesn’t matter as much as the company. You can take me to hell if you want to, I don’t care.”

“That’s it?” Rachel winked.

“Yup, that’s it. Why would I need more, Rach? Well, except that pizza. It looks fucking great, and after all this hike in the woods, I’m starving. Dinner tastes better with music and since you didn’t bring my boombox with ya…” Chloe finished with a slice of her favorite treat in one hand and one of the earbuds in other. As far as Rachel remembered they were exactly the same headphones.

“I thought you’d never ask.” She smiled, putting her head on the blue pirate’s arm and wearing the other earbud.

When the music started to swish in her ear the train gasped, winded and moved slowly.

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“Nat, is it really necessary?” Kris scoffed and turned back to him, still trying to find her phone. Her day had been terribly hectic, and she was literally doing everything to be done with work soon enough to finally start the most pleasant part of the day. Steph was probably worried. Or angry. Or both.

Her brother didn’t say much, following her every step like a docile shadow, since they crossed their paths in Sean Prescott’s office, where they both secretly wanted through the desk’s drawers. Ashamed a bit and leaving in a rush, Kris tried everything to avoid talking, but it discouraged Nathan at all. Moreover, he even brought her this ridiculous tea he had made by himself as a pathetic form of peace offering or just at least spark for conversation. This hot beverage was an equivalent of a chocolate cake or Thanksgiving turkey, regarding his lack of any practical skills whatsoever. Apparently, Nathan felt lonely and needed some company, but what a day he had picked.

Well, he would have to suck it up. Fuck it.

Their reunion had quickly turned sour, largely due to Nathan’s unpredictable behavior, arrogance, and resistance to any kind of help. On one hand, he demanded his sister to spend every minute with him, even if it meant doing absolutely nothing, on the other he was quite stubborn with hiding his secrets, talking or even arguing with himself. That first was leaving Kris worried and flabbergasted but then it had driven a wedge between them. Tired of ups and downs and engaged with her private life, Prescott’s daughter learned how to stay away from her brother, even if his well-being was still on her top list. Jefferson had called her twice this month, politely explaining he had made progress, and Nathan was willing to see a specialist, but her brother, even if confirming that such a negotiation had taken place, still refused to proceed, playing fox to the hounds. Mostly sticking to spending time
alone and ditching the uncanny, wild parties, he became a whinnying hermit and Kris had no idea how to turn things around. Her patience in that regard also ran down to zero.

Speaking of, she was rushing not only oddly uncomfortable in the presence of her younger sibling, but this time having some serious plans for tonight. Her relationship with Steph was in calamity, and Kris was quite desperate to make up for the lost time. Even if her girlfriend didn’t say much, it was more than evident that they were on the edge of falling apart or damaging their relationship to the point of no return. Kris wasn’t stupid, aware of what factors led to this situation, but boy, ho boy it was hard to fix this. Throwing money at Steph didn’t work at all, the obscene wealth didn’t make an impression, so it was about time to turn the tables and play within the DND queen’s rules. If her girlfriend wanted something ordinary, Kris was all up for it, changing from high heels to sneakers and designer purse for a simple bag. They could go all high school as far as she was concerned if it would only help to preserve what they already had.

And then her plans got interrupted with a ghost holding a mug of tea.

“I wouldn’t ask you if it wasn’t urgent.” Stamping and almost tripping on his feet, Nathan lowered his head. He looked miserable, pale, sick. It would be hard not to feel pity for him, and Kris wasn’t really against trying to give this reconnecting thing one more chance, but for crying out loud, not today.

“My schedule is pretty tight tonight.” She shook her head, finding one pair of red and white running shoes and grabbing an old, jean jacket. Not enough for February, it was still cold, but Kris hoped to be warmed up in certain arms damn soon. “I can’t rearrange it just on a snap. Is there any chance we can postpone it like for tomorrow?” Kris suggested, paying more attention to her outfit than Nathan. It was more comfortable that way. This, or hours of weird banters.

“It’s important!” She huddled when her brother yelled, almost bursting in tears and spinning out of control. “I mean…” Calming down instantly, he hugged the tea mug, mortified with his own outburst. “I rarely ask you for anything, Kris. You’re always so busy with the foundation, papers, your…” She expected him to say dates, but Nathan still didn’t want to acknowledge the simple fact that his sister was taken. “…Meetings. I know you have some plans for today, everybody has, except me…” Playing a victim wasn’t something he was proud of but usually worked when it came to his sister.

Kris straightened up at once.

“Don’t say it.”

“It’s true. I mean… It’s fine.” His fingers drummed on the cup. “It’s not because of Valentine’s or anything. I just wanted to show you something very important to me. Something that might change my life. And yours. It’s just…” Nathan bit his lip for the hundredth time today, almost chewing on his own flesh and skin. “Just… Have you ever felt like you have this one precious thing that you care so much about and you can’t tell anybody? Like…” Gesturing desperately he almost spilled the tea. “Something that makes you happy but it’s also painful because no one else knows and…”

There was something different about him. Something that was eating him up inside, frustrating and driving up the wall. Kris frowned, still watching her brother wondering if it was an innuendo to yet another breakdown or the possibility of a breakthrough. Hoping for the latter, she took the mug from him, silently accepting the offer.

“How long will it take?” The tea was bitter, not really tasty, but it was the effort that mattered.

“Not long. Just maybe an hour or so.”
“Fine.”

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“What?” It was hard to understand the blue mumble when the words and hair got tangled by the night train ride. The wind was choking them, forcing into silence that they didn’t mind, even if growing anxious about how fast it kept going. The journey started slow and peaceful though but then the train sped up to a dull and colorless center, having no regard in breaking the romantic mood. Surrounded by the loud drumming whooshes and black shapes flickering hastily in front of their eyes, they held each other closer, with the earbuds still on. The music tried to compete with the peal of steel wheels but became inaudible a long time ago. Both girls didn’t move though nor fight with the outcome, listening to their breaths and heartbeats only, without a need to talk.

Now it had changed.

“I have something for you,” Chloe repeated, almost yelling and brushing a blonde lock, tangled by the windbreaks. The contrast between the tone of her voice and tender gesture almost made Rachel giggle, but she was too curious to start cracking up. Dragging something out from her jacket’s pocket, the blue pirate snuck deeper to the inside hoping not to yell much more. There was a story she wanted to tell. “It’s not much since we’re dirt poor now and stuff, but…”

Immediately she got poked in the arm.

“Chloe!” Sighing was difficult when sitting in the open door and attacked by the cold gale. Rolling her eyes was easier. “When will you learn I didn’t marry you for your bank account?”

“I would never accuse you of such a delusion. I know you wedded me only because of my punk shaped ass and the noble pirate heart. Anyway, here.” The freight car squeaked and turned rapidly just within a moment of passing this small gift. For a second the blue pirate was afraid that her girl would drop the package by accident, but Rachel crawled into the safer space and began to unpack the small bundle, not much bigger than a pack of matches. Nervous, Chloe took a deep breath, starting an unnecessary explanation. “It’s not much, but… There is a story behind it. A long, long time ago it belonged to my granddad. He was quite a handyman himself and liked to create something beautiful from junk he found around.” The unwrapping took Rachel just a second, and now she was staring at an old-fashioned pocket watch.

“Runs in the family.” Rachel’s fingers traced the lines of the vintage device’s shape, discovering every corner and angle, as she was indeed amazed by the gift. She opened it carefully, marveling at its delicate and refined structure. Surprisingly, it was still working, with tantalizing, decorative arms of the clock tickling lightly. Closing it, Rachel noticed a remarkable component fostered in the top cover. “Is it a quarter?”

“Yeah.” Now it was Chloe’s turn to get all proud. When she found this piece in one of the old suitcases in the attic, she couldn’t believe her luck. Never paying attention to her granddad’s stash, she was swept off her feet, finding a collection of treasures, including pocket watches of any shape, size, and style. Finding the one with a quarter already sealed in felt like destiny. “Cool, right? Now you will have one always on you. I mean, if you decide to carry it around. It’s just… I fixed it a bit and worked on it, so it looks brand new and…” The gusts of wind were eating her words. Chloe skulked closer to her wife. “And you told me you like practical gifts, so…” Ah, damn. This pocket watch, enriched by history and personal touch would fit the big-ass lawyer Rachel wanted to
become, but college talk was a taboo for them both since Harvard’s rejection. Chloe didn’t have much time or funds to come up with anything else, sticking to the previous idea and hoping her girl wouldn’t make a connection between their failed plans for the future and the actual gift. So far, Rachel looked pretty content. “I promise I will make it up to you later.” She assured quickly. “Like when we will be fifthly rich and shit.”

“Shhh…” A blonde finger stopped the waterfall of words. A small kiss to the lips followed. “How do you always know what I want?”

“Practice.”

Laughing, Rachel liberated herself from the headphone’s cable, now entirely useless, first giving her girl a big hug and then reaching for her own bag.

“I have something for you too.” She said handling the pirate a small envelope. All suspicious, Chloe turned it around, trying to guess what kind of gift it was and hoping it wasn’t expensive. Throwing money that they didn’t have was making her more apprehensive than grateful. Sometimes the pirate wondered how Steph dealt with a similar problem. This train ride was way too much and now yet another? The letter seemed plain and ordinary though. No name, no stamp, nothing. “Open it.” Rachel encouraged her, feeling oddly worried. It could go so wrong very quickly if her rebel didn’t like the content. “C’mon.”

Not rushing, the blue confusion slowly lifted the lid, looking inside and finding only one piece of paper. Not a card even, no glitter or any pink hearts included, but a printed sheet with a few sentences and signed by some important dude or something. It looked formal, out of place, not really romantic or passionate. So, no poetry then. Sensing trouble, she unfolded the letter carefully and began to read, getting more tense with every single word skimmed through.

“Rach...” She whispered lightly, getting to the end but too puzzled to look at her wife.

The train slowed down rapidly, almost stopping.

“I know you wanted to go...”

Chloe read it one more time. Then again. To make a long story short, she was just gifted with the trip to Boston, a chance to visit the MIT campus, enjoy the city and have fun with all her science buddies, just as Mrs. Grant wanted. Her favorite teacher also signed this letter, formally confirming that this pirate wouldn’t have to pay a cent, and everything, including even a city pass, was covered.

It had to cost thousands. They barely scraped the bottom of the barrel to have a twenty for beer and smokes. For a second, Chloe was sure that Mrs. Grant paid for it from her own salary or called the school board, but then it wouldn’t be given to her on Valentine’s. Clever. It was a freaking trap, she couldn’t refuse, but...

“I don’t get it. How?” The blue eyes stared directly at Rachel. “I thought we can’t?”

The train shook them both, getting up to speed.

“We can. I withdrew myself from the drama club camp.” Rachel leaned against the wall, lighting up a smoke still tense and quite apprehensive. Practicing Shakespeare in a luxurious resort in California didn’t seem like a bad idea until she heard that Mark could show up holding another photo session. Without Arcadia Bay’s safety net nor her pirate being around it wouldn’t be something that Rachel was up for. Not to mention, it was definitely problematic with the certain crowd around and the temptation to reach for something stronger than a cigarette. The last few months if not years were
damn hectic, and Rachel found herself not looking forward to this expedition at all, surprisingly discovering that she felt more lost without Chloe that her pirate was without her. Sure, James and Rose Amber gladly paid for it, as they had always done, politely supporting any kind of endeavor of hers, happy she got back to high-class entertainment, but the blue trouble needed this money more. She earned it. “I can do good onstage without any expensive trip, and I’m not really into locking horns with Tori the whole week straight, but you seriously should check out Boston and find us some place to stay. We need an apartment, know a thing or two about the living costs, check the best places to hang out. So, this thing is an investment for our future, baby.” She finished a bit too harshly, as always when not willing to sell out the whole truth.

She couldn’t go. She didn’t deserve it. Not after what happened with Harvard.

Her pirate turned the letter in her hands again, still not sure what to think. Of course, she wanted to visit Boston, but this trip seemed more like a sacrifice than a heartwarming present. It wasn’t the first time her blonde anger abandoned some of her plans for the sake of their well-being, but never so evidently. Feeling put on the spot Chloe snorted again, feeling her throat tightening up. Now she couldn’t even get sick or anything, damn it, having her spring break well-organized. Her eyes started itching, probably because of the runny nose and all. Hell. Not even able to argue or change Rachel’s mind, since it would either cost them a heated fight or none of them going anywhere, she huddled over caressing the piece of paper with her fingers.

“Investment…”

“Alright,” To Chloe’s favor the whole explanation didn’t sound so alluring or sexy. Ready to fix that, Rachel smiled reaching for her hand, but her pirate seemed numb and disoriented. That got her worried, so she wrapped her arms around her girl, burying her face in the mess of blue hair. “I’m sending you for a romantic, difficult and dangerous quest. Does it sound better? You don’t have to kill any dragons or battle with any dark forces, although if you won’t send me a postcard, I will be freaking upset.” She kissed her ear considering taking this letter out of the shaking blue hands but retreated in the last moment. “Just saying.”

Chloe’s bottom lip was trembling a bit.

“Rach...” She whispered. “Without you?”

Lowering her head, Rachel felt bad. To make ends meet and cover the rest of the expenses, she had to drain not only her bank account but also start a credit line and call her mom, cousins and estranged grandmother. That included some lying here and there or tons of half-truths, effort and arrangements, but it wasn’t only about the cost. She wanted to do it for them, to prove that despite her academic failure some plans were still ongoing, and Chloe came first. Although even if her pirate really desired this journey to be booked for two, it was impossible. Rachel was damn broke and would be for the next two months, probably living off pancakes and waffles from Two Whales, and the next Starbucks coffee could be purchased around her graduation. Not to mention that Chloe had to have some funds to spend out there.

They couldn’t afford to go together, even if she really fucking wanted to.

“There is a limit to every surprise.” Straining her acting skills, Rachel responded somehow cheerfully. “You’ve been gifted with a nice opportunity to miss me a little. Max is going too, or so I was told.” Sending Chloe out with this little freckle sounded like a risky idea, almost as much as jumping off the moving train, but Rachel trusted her wife. Well, trusted in this particular faithfulness department, aware that this blue rebel needed some kind of voice of reason by her side. Just in case she would come to the conclusion that demolishing the whole New England was dope. “Just don’t lash out there too much.” She warned, finally taking away the letter and putting it back in her bag.
“Pot is illegal in Mass.”

The blue mind was occupied by an entirely different thought though.

“So, Boston.” Blinking, Chloe whispered staring at Rachel again. “We’re moving to Boston? Together? This summer?”

She hadn’t asked about their plans for the rest of the year, too scared to even drift around the stormy waters of the college talk. Rachel had gotten angry or depressed every time the blue pirate awkwardly tried to spark a conversation, so it was better to sail away from this rocky shore of doubts and troubles. That left Chloe in a bizarre and uncomfortable situation, unable to actually make plans for herself and prepare for her own academic career as she preferred to do it together. Considering even dropping out of college before it also began, she just did whatever she did best, which was nothing and waiting for a magic solution to appear. Wasting time with Vortex was yet another reason why deep down she was getting upset, as they wandered away from the most important topic, just to have a moment of brief, fleeting fun.

Adulthood and all, but it was stupid to drink and dance with assholes while there was some unfinished business to deal with. Chloe hated unfinished stuff even if she didn’t quite know how to deal with it.

Apparently, the answer was just in her hands.

“Yeah? Why are you surprised?” Rachel spread her hands, not sure why it was even a question. “Nothing changed in this regard. You start MIT this year, and I wouldn’t let you do it alone. Somebody has to keep you on a leash otherwise you would get too much into… Oh.” Suddenly, she was pushed onto the blankets, covered by blue chaotic kisses to her lips, neck, ears, and nose, accompanied with stifling and hide a few stupid tears, desperately hidden. Jackpot. Chloe liked it.

She liked it.

“That’s the best gift ever.”

“A lonely trip to the other side of the country?” Rachel tried to joke, but her voice failed her, forcing her to whisper. This kissing thing wasn’t that ridiculous of a solution after all. Pulling the pirate back she demanded more but got stopped.

“No.” She felt Chloe’s hand on her cheek, caressing lightly. This time every word murmured was perfectly perceptible. “Future. With you.”

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Reality was coming back in strident with snappy movements breaking down to a blur and then sharpening. Then the crashing waves of awareness hit her and pulled back like a tide. She was almost getting there, almost opening her eyes, and falling into the darkness yet again. This odd flow reminded her of the time when she was a little girl, perhaps five-years-old, and her parents took her sailing. Her brother hadn’t even been around yet, so it was only the three of them happy and bonding over simple activities like any other family. Her mom smiling, her father courageously playing a captain and the small, but expensive boat swaying on the waves. At first, this little girl had gotten scared she would fall into the deep water and no one would find her, but then got used to the smooth swinging, enjoying the tickling, delightful breeze.
The darkness sliced by the bright light, hit her again, reminding roughly that it wasn’t Sunday morning at the bay but an entirely different place- a place she wasn’t familiar with at all.

“What...” Kris squinted her eyes, adjusting to the bright, flashy light. “What happened?” She whispered still disoriented while trying to identify the moving shadows among the vivid beams. “Where am I?” That caused more shadows to float between one bright spot to another, as a few whispers put a different commotion in play.

“I think she woke up.” She heard someone saying. The voice sounded familiar, but she couldn’t really connect it with a name.

“Let’s see.” An outline of a person, certainly not a monster, covered the blazing light, getting closer. It took her a while to recognize the facial features, and that confused her even more. “Welcome, Miss Prescott.” Mark Jefferson kneeled in front of her, tilted his head smiling kindly like a good uncle doing her a favor. “My apologies for the conditions of your stay but I really hope you don’t mind. Much.” Another apologetic smirk, as he seemed worried about her condition. Kris noted that indeed she had no idea how she got here. Was she in an accident? Was that it? The last thing she could recall was this tea she had been drinking and then blackness. Was it some sort of a memory loss? “Please forgive us the extreme measures we had to take to bring you here although you fully understand now that a simple invitation wouldn’t work.”

More aware of her situation Kris shook off this overwhelming weakness, not up for another high school lecture. It was probably one of his artistical therapy sessions of some sort. Not really understanding what was going on and not willing to play a part in his theater of shadows she tried to get up but noticed her ankles and wrists were tied up to the chair by a duct tape. She pushed once, then twice, hissing from pain and intense headache. The bonds didn’t get loose though, keeping her in place and forcing to listen. Oh boy.

“Is this a joke?” Giving up the wriggle, Kris snapped panting a bit. Her struggle was an apparently amusing spectacle for her brother’s teacher who was observing her like a pinned butterfly ready to expand his collection.

Over her dead body.

“Does it look like one? Sadly, you are a smart creature, Kris. Not extraordinary or anyway special, but not stupid. Mostly because of your constant prying you became a problem. No, not for me,” he touched her chest in a dramatic gesture, pretending that was nothing personal. Bullshit. “I wouldn’t take my private quarrels that far. For him.” When pointed at, another shadow behind the bright reflectors moved, but Kris couldn’t really see who that was. “He needs to transform you to liberate himself, taste the forbidden fruit, take the next step.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, and your silly jokes do not impress me.” Alright, she was done. If that was one of the things her brother really wanted to show off, it could wait or most likely got canceled. She had plans, urgent ones actually, and some very special girl was probably losing her mind worrying. Or getting angry. Or both. “I’m warning you,” Kris demanded firmly. “Untie me. Now.”

Used to the fact that people usually rushed to fulfill her wishes, especially after she had gotten back and turned her life around, Kris got painfully surprised that Jefferson didn’t move an inch. He was the one in charge here and wasn’t up for giving it up so quickly. At some point he would have to though, she thought, but not yet.

Not yet.
“I would love to, but you wouldn’t follow the procedure so willingly. So beautiful, so damaged, so disgracefully degraded.” He touched her face in a creepy way which combined with the terrible taste of the tea that she could still feel at the tip of her tongue almost made her nauseous. She turned her head back but couldn’t escape his fingers. “It would be an honor to change your light into shadows, but now you became too dark, Kris. You are too corrupted to become an object so you will have to serve as a transition.” Jefferson sighed, sincerely disappointed. “Pity.”

“Transition? What…” Her eyesight got used to the bright light, finally absorbing where she really was. Noticing the heavy, solid bunker-like door and weirdly sanitary space of the room itself, Kris grew a bit uneasy. Jefferson was surrendering himself to really dark tastes then, mixing his photography with a serial killer-wannabe boner. “What do you want to do with me?” Sounding weak wasn’t her intention but couldn’t stop the panic and outgrow her pretended relaxed demeanor.

Jefferson got up, standing still with his eyes closed, just like an actor before a great performance, recalling all the lines and grasping the character he wanted to become. Quite fitting, but even if scared, Kris couldn’t help thinking how pretentious it was. How her brother and even Rachel were following this guy was beyond her.

Way beyond.

“I will use you as the shadow that will bring your brother to light.” He vowed. “Liberate him from all those obstacles that you promised to free him from but never kept your word. Do something useful with your life since you wasted it so recklessly.”

“I swear to God that this is going too far, I’m gonna…” Her fingers grasped on the armchair.

“You gonna do what?” He jumped back to her like a wild spider attacking his captured prey. “Scream? Yell?” Laughing hard was probably even worse than this malicious whisper he was speaking with. “You have to reconcile yourself, find the peace in your destiny. I know it’s not what you think you would become, but there is no disgrace in your journey. No shame. Shadows are also needed, Kris. How would you appreciate the light, if there will be no dark corners?”

When he spoke, one of the shadows came out to shape, and Kris took a deep breath, noticing her brother. Nathan’s presence calmed her down instantly, even if she was more than angry at this high school clown who somehow got erected to a position of a mentor and tutor for young, lost kids. So, it was just a play after all, something they both brewed for some time, and there was nothing to be frightened about. One way or another, Jefferson could start packing his bags.

He was so fucking fired.

“Spare me the mundane philosophy.” She scoffed, hoping that it wouldn’t take long and how crazy this explanation for Steph would sound like. Honey, I’m so late because a creep my brother likes so much decided to tie me up in his fancy basement. Her girlfriend wasn’t gonna believe this shit.

Still, Kris would give up all the wealth in the world to be with Steph right now. Everything.

“You have two options, Kris.” Jefferson kept ranting. “Either you will beg me for your life, to keep your existence as it is, proving how much I can trust in your confidentiality, or you will face your fate with your head up and useless pride. It’s the only decision you are allowed to make although the outcome would stay the same. Choose wisely.”

Alright, that sounded dangerous, but Kris was quite confident it was just part of the play. Wondering if it was how they usually held things, a stupid prank crafted just for her or a weird way to taste their limits, she leaned over in her seat, waiting for an opportunity to talk to her brother. Nathan, even if
bat-shit crazy sometimes, was easy to bend to her will if she really wanted to, Jefferson was probably, more or less, aware of her power. That was why her younger sibling was still hiding at the back, too shy to step forward.

If this teacher wanted to see her distressed and crying as part of his so-called healing through art, he would be fucking disappointed. Kris decided to talk some sense to him, even if rationality didn’t seem like Jefferson’s area of interest.

“You said I’m too smart, but you can’t be blind enough to think that if you do something to me, it wouldn’t go unnoticed. My father…”

“You father has been willingly cooperating with us for years, Kris.” Jefferson cut her off one more time. “Who do you think paid for all of it?”

It that supposed to scare her, it worked totally opposite. If Sean Prescott was aware of this weird, artistic performance, Kris felt even safer, certain that her own money couldn’t turn against her. The only people who should be afraid of the consequences were those two. Nathan could always get away even with murder since he was family, but this old hippie was about to suffer real consequences. Despite his outstanding talent and experience, Jefferson, or rather Jeffershit as she started to call him in her thoughts, would never find any employment again. Either in this state, this country or even on this continent.

“Pay? I will tell you something about paying. You will pay for it.” She hissed. “Everybody would know about your little circus and twisted artsy experiments. At some point, everybody would know.”

“Even if so, it wouldn’t be your concern then.”

Apparently, he took pleasure in this meaningless conversation. Not fighting with her ties anymore, Kris closed her eyes, taking some rest from the bright reflectors. He didn’t like this approach very much, as her chilling down offended him somehow. Well, suck it up, princess. Not everybody wanted to take an active part of his sick drama. Immersion in art was quite overrated.

Satisfied with his punch line, Jefferson walked to one of the metal carts, standing on the border between light and the darkness. Snapping the white, rubber gloves on his hands, like a doctor or a forensic specialist he started working on something in silence, moving glass tubs and plastic containers. Well, quite convincing, she had to give it to the guy. Creating this world, he paid attention to every single detail. A syringe appeared as he lifted it up checking if the fluid reached the needle, bubbling at the pointy end and shaking it firmly a few times. She wondered what this liquid was made of. Ginger beer or bubble gum soda?

“Are you aware of chaos theory, Kris? That if the butterfly flaps its wings in Shanghai that could create a tornado in Oregon?” Just when Kris finally started to ignore his presence, she heard him talking.

She almost giggled, but it was better not to enrage him more. Being stabbed by a needle would be the last nail to his coffin, but she wasn’t looking forward to experiencing that.

“You think you’re a tornado then?”

“No, far from it,” Jefferson responded slowly tapping the side of the syringe, then filling it up a bit more. Tap, tap. “I like to think I prevent hurricanes from happening, replacing it with the whisper of waves crashing calmly on the shore. Sacrificing one can bring harmony and armistice. Sacrificing many would bring only death and destruction. An act of art is always selfish but can save so many.” She was gifted with a smile she couldn’t wait to wipe off.
“How so?”

“Well…” Mark put the syringe down, and turned back to her, still smiling. “I just cut off the butterfly’s wings before they start flapping.”

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“What were you thinking about then?” Nestling in the pirate’s arms, Rachel kept listening to the click of train wheels and the blue heartbeat. The slow pace of their ride was making her sleepy, so it was a battle to keep her eyes open. They should prepare for a departure soon since the iron horse probably was about to reach the Columbia river, but neither of them were keen on even moving a finger, too comfortable and enchanted in their cuddle.

“Then?” It took Chloe a moment to absorb what her girl was referring to. “Ah.” Breathing out the smoke, the blue memory pondered, getting back to the first days of May almost four years ago and her other self nervously trying to start a small talk exactly in the same train cart. Different life, different circumstances and damn, at the end it turned out so great, but she could still recall the edginess and strange pickup lines. “When would it end? Is this one of Rachel Amber’s games or the beginning of something great? And when you ditch me for some fancier friend… Or more likely for a guy like one of those football jerks that were always around. I wasn’t that used to hanging out with the most popular people or hanging out, that’s it. But deep down I really, really wanted to…” She stopped half-word.

The pause was getting longer. Chloe stuffed the scrubby ember of her smoke and threw out the rest of it into the dark. The tracks were drumming peacefully, playing on her nostalgia and willingness to dive into the past. Not something that the not-so-reckless rebel was unfamiliar with but knew for a fact it was damn addictive. She preferred to think about the future.

Especially now.

“To…?” Rachel whispered, still waiting.

A light blue smirk appeared, followed by the incontrollable shyness and hint of a stutter.

“To… To check if you’re real. Touch your shirt. Smell your hair. And…” Her own private mischief was looking directly at Rachel’s lips now. “…To kiss you.” She added softly, noticing that those hazel eyes sparkled in a distinctive, dangerous way. Evidently, her blonde angel had way more in mind than a simple peck to the mouth. “Don’t look at me like that. A kiss seemed extreme enough. I don’t think I went further in my mind then.”

“Well, I did.” Rachel bluntly admitted, tracing the line of the blue lips, from left to right and then yet again. A kiss would be a nice start, but not the end of the road.

Her hand got caught and her fingers kissed.

“Pervert. Damn you, Rach.” Chloe gave her a very dirty look, stifling her laughter. “Did you really want to do dirty things with me on this filthy wooden floor and take my innocence?”

“Take everything. Did I hear a complaint? And the state of the floor wasn’t my concern at all since I was placing myself on your lap.” Actually, it was the reason why even Rachel had thought about the blankets today. Just in case some more passionate developments would take place. “I was giving you
so many signals you could literally park a fucking plane on a steep, dark hill with them. It was frustrating.” She confessed, not ashamed at all, running fingers through her hair.

“It was.” Chloe laughed and pulled her closer.

The blue heartbeat drummed again against Rachel’s ears in a peaceful rhythm, mingling with the iron clangs and jangles. She closed her eyes, grateful for being here, for this treasure of a girl who became hers, and for another chance in life to make things right. On the one hand, she didn’t appreciate it often, on the other, not a day passed without thinking how blessed and fortunate Rachel Price was.

Fate was a strange thing, so was life.

“That’s why I wanted to play two truths and a lie.” She murmured, diving back to the past again. It was nice to joke about the beginning, all the missteps and mistakes, shyness and wariness, primarily if the upshot was so satisfying. One of the things that they both valued, a secret knowledge not shared with anybody else, was one of the traditions they cultivated during those long and quite rare moments. Everyday life had eaten up a lot of the magic from their relationship, but they knew how to get it back.

“To have an excuse to put your head on my shoulder or be more frustrated?” Chloe winked. “Wanna play now?”

“You want to get laid or be lied to?” If it was a challenge, Rachel was all ready for it. “Alright. Is there any mystery of yours I haven’t uncovered yet?”

They hadn’t done it in months, even years, learning more about each other through living together not by simple riddles. It seemed fitting though, as one missing piece they should also preserve.

“I’m sure there is.” Her blue pirate announced. “I still have some secrets.”

“Alright, now I’m intrigued. Try me, Chloe Price.”

To play this game, they couldn’t cuddle; otherwise, it would lead strictly to cheating. Sitting in front of each other they both lit up cigarettes, shared the rest of the wine and Chloe secretly put the last piece of pizza in her mouth at once. Giving Rachel the puppy eyes, she felt guilty at once, but her girl waved it off. She was full after this unhealthy cut of cheese and bacon anyway.

“Fact number one.” Chloe rose one finger. “I always had a fear of going to Disneyworld. I’ve always wanted to, but I was too scared of the crowd and getting lost. Fun times can become a nightmare kinda thing. Fact number two.” The second finger appeared. The one that was usually used in a different kind of game of insulting strangers. “In sixth grade, I ate eighty something chicken nuggets, and I got so sick that my mom almost called 911. I puked all over the bathroom though. Hated Popeyes ever since.” Rachel nodded already calculating her picks. “Fact number three…”

Chloe hesitated for a second. “I didn’t tell you that the truck exploded because somebody tried to shoot us.” She blurted out quickly, raising the third finger and then turning away.

Rachel got quiet.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Chloe smirked still trying to stare at the dark nothing in front of her. “This Disneyworld is super scary, man.”

“The Disneyworld thing is bullshit since you still want to go, and I have no idea how you ate those chicken nuggets, but you somehow did. You know I’m talking about the old rusty.” It wasn’t easy to
turn Chloe’s face to her, but Rachel knew how to manage. She wasn’t angry nor even disappointed but really freaking worried. Did anybody want to hurt her girl? Was it an act of revenge? Why though?

“I could’ve lied twice.” As always when put on the spot, her blue treasure grew a bit frantic. Trying to maneuver out of the way too comfortable embrace, she got stopped, kissed and pulled closer as somebody was awaiting answers. Fuck. That wasn’t how this game was supposed to play. Although, Chloe wanted to tell Rachel the truth, but couldn’t find the right time for such a confession. The window, or rather a wagon of opportunity appeared, but it didn’t feel right after all, especially with her wife being so loving and patient. She expected some yelling or decent, fuming accusations, not just a soft, warm kiss again. Damn you, Valentine.

To be frank, this blue pirate didn’t really lie at all.

“She what the fuck happened out there?” Rachel wasn’t about to let her go so easily.

Sighing, scoffing, turning around and wriggling didn’t help as it never did, so Chloe gave up quickly, relieved and tensed up at the same time.

“I don’t know.” It was the simple and the sincerest explanation, but Rachel wanted more. What a demanding creature. “David checked the truck and showed me a gunshot hole just above the tank. According to him, it was no accident, and no firework could cause it. He thinks it could be a hunter or some kid playing with his daddy’s gun in the woods to celebrate New Year’s. You know those redneck dickheads. I didn’t want to scare you, and with everything happening right now with college and shit it was just…” What a terrible occasion to bring this asshole back. Her blue heart broke every time Frank Bowers had been mentioned, or his existence was even suggested. Not much, just a crack now, without a scare that the old wound would reopen, but still uncomfortable. Sore. Damn. “Rach, we both know, that there is only one person who could do it intentionally. Only one.”

Her girl sighed, focusing on her own cig that ate itself up burning close to her fingers. The blue chest tightened when the silence prolonged. The crack in her heart just got bigger, widening like a gorge shaping up after an earthquake. No biggie though, it was an old tale, they both had gotten over it.

Or had they?

“Apparently more than one.” Taking a long inhale, Rachel shrugged, not keen on elaborating but now feeling pressured to. “Bowers is in jail.”

“What?” Chloe choked on her smoke. Fighting for another breath, she hit her chest a few times coughing and clearing her throat. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Don’t you read the news?” The local newspapers had been risen under the blue pirate’s nose a few times, but she obviously ignored them all. Even if understanding why, Rachel hoped that at least the big, bulky headlines got read. Well, shit. “He’s still awaiting trial, but he won’t get out anytime soon. He’s facing some serious charges including some severe drug dealing and murder of his comrade, Damon Merrick. Obviously, somebody found the body and tipped the police. They have all the evidence in the world, including his DNA and locations of his phone. He’s fucked.” Another long inhale. Rachel closed her eyes thinking about Sera. Her biological mother had kept her word, sending Bowers far away from everybody. As far as she could even if breaking some unwritten laws. “Case closed.”

Chloe felt stupid even bringing it back up. Quite a cautionary tale on how to ruin this lovely celebration.
“Maybe it was a lost hunter after all.” She murmured still unconvinced.

“Maybe.” They both didn’t believe it, but at least one of the worst possibilities got scratched out. Oregon wilderness was overpopulated with strangers, freaks and adventure hunters, not often heading back there for the end of the year celebration but neither of the girls could come up with a better explanation. Just a kid with his daddy’s gun was as good a guess as any’s. “You’re terrible.” The blue arm got smacked. Rachel finally remembered how to get angry, even showing a shade of her abilities in that regard. “You’re fucking terrible, Chloe. Why do you always have to hide shit like that?”

“You know why. I’m a shitty liar. Your turn.”

Rachel frowned, totally forgetting about the game they were playing. It took her a while to get back to this specific playful mindset needed to continue. Good. At least one easy way out of this tense topic. Two truths and a lie of a break.

“Ah. Fact number one. When I was like super young, my parents wanted me to get a proper education and forced me to start playing violin...”

“Fingers training?” Chloe cut her off. This blue asshole always tried to crack a joke when anxious or abashed. Her attempt was met with a deep sigh though. Rachel wasn’t quite in the mood for nasty jokes. Not anymore.

“Nah. I hated this fucking instrument with all my heart. I couldn’t stand playing the same boring notes every day, and it sounded like slaughtered, crying puppies. I felt like a puppy too forced to rasp those four fucking strings. I wasn’t terrible or anything, but I ditched it as soon as my parents let me. Anyway, a few years forward, I wanted to impress my girlfriend, Chloe Price.”

“Never heard of her.”

“Smart. Sassy. Great in Bed?” Apparently, the name still didn’t ring a bell. Showing up her great and fake disappointment, Rachel tapped out the ash. “Shame. She’s the most incredible person I know.”

“Oh, you.” Chloe blushed a bit. Well, score.

“So, one day I decided to play something for her, but I was out of practice, so instead of embarrassing myself in front of her, I decided to record it and send it to her via text or something. Painfully romantic, I know.” The previous, painful subject got shunned away. Now her mind was filled with the stertorous memory of the four old strings, pulled, pressed and yanked in pure despair. “Anyway, after the whole afternoon of trying to squeeze anything from my old violin and finally recording something kinda decent I smashed the thing against the wall and... I chickened out. I never sent it.” Shrugging, Rachel avoided the verdict, pretty sure Chloe would call it bullshit.

“Show it to me.” Her blue treasure demanded at once.

“You’re calling truth?”

“I’m calling for your phone.” It wasn’t the right way to serve such a demand, especially that Chloe quickly moved from words to deeds, first trying to grab Rachel’s bag and when this didn’t occur, with a heavy heart she decided to pull out the big guns. Desperate times called for extreme measures.

“Baby!” Rachel giggled, wrestling with her on the ground, protecting herself from the blue devil tickling her like crazy. Missing the blankets, they rolled on a filthy and dirty floor for a good minute. “Stop!” Finally able to catch her breath, she pushed Chloe back. “I don’t have this video anymore. I deleted it.” The tickling didn’t stop. Fuck. Damn it. “Baby! That was like 3 phones ago!”
Reluctantly, Chloe stopped, jailing her in her arms in return. This game was way better than she had remembered. They should do it more often.

“Will you play for me ever again?”

“Well I torture you with my terrible lack of skills? Sure. See what you’re doing to me?” Pushing this devil back was impossible, but she gained a wide grin in return. Fine, if that was how Chloe wanted to play it, she had some big guns too. Kissing her pirate passionately not only sweetened the mood but took her girl aback. They separated, and Rachel still blushing and sweaty, got back to the play. “Fact number two.” She announced. “I broke into the principal’s office to steal this fucking bird from his desk to give it to you. You always wanted it, so I thought it would serve as a nice surprise, plus I could establish myself as a high rolling criminal in your eyes. But I got caught, and nothing came out of it. Bummer.”

Chloe thought for a while but shook her head almost immediately.

“That’s too bold for even for you. I’m calling lie.”

“Are you sure?” Alright, this one rascal got far too good in this game. “I can be a bad girl if I wanted to. Alright, fine. It’s bullshit, but I was seriously considering it at some point. And…” Noticing a small change in the blue eyes, Rachel lost her train of thought. “…What?”

At first, Chloe was just staring at her as her unique manner spoke louder than words. Not moving closer or even trying to reach her, she kept watching her wife, waiting for the speech to form itself, not the other way around. Nothing was forcing her though, there was no need nor urge, but this rare moment was too exceptional to just dismiss.

“Your eyes are sparkling like a thousand stars.” The low tone of her voice took Rachel’s breath away. “You… You just look stunning.”

“Is that what you wanted to say back then?” She whispered, protecting herself from blushing and failing spectacularly.

Resting against the walls, covered with graffiti, profanities, affirmations, and zigzags, Chloe strained again. There was no teddy bear or sad, ashamed puppy, but a woman who knew exactly what she wanted and what she was thankful for. A girl who got born out of a small, shy kid, sitting precisely in the same spot years ago, mumbling and nibbling on her fingernails. Now, the pirate’s awareness of inner power and attraction, not faked or forged, was intoxicating. Chloe Price, in all her glory, finally understood the power she had over her own wife and was ready to use it. Rachel got quiet and shy. Thank God she was sitting, as she was sure her legs would be trembling.

If she was a Leo, here came the blue tiger.

“If I could, sure.” Her treasure responded narrowing her eyes and gifting her wife with even more chills. “I was so speechless. Shit fact, every time I look at you I still am. I can’t find words to describe how you make me feel. The fact that you are here… With me. Mine. Still mine. And…”

Breaking her act, Chloe sighed looking at the starry sky up there. The dark wall of trees was still whirling and zipping, but the firmament remained still. “Without you, I felt so trapped in this dark room in my head without any light. And hope and… and now everything is… so bright. Just like the stars and…” The moment had passed. The confession, even if starting at the high note was crumbling down to pieces, so she shut up respectfully, hoping not to embarrass herself more.

“Chloe…”
The kiss was slow, with sparks of passion, careful and fervent, wary in one way and obsessive in another. While them being a couple, they had learned that this simple, basic caress had so many flavors, tastes, and varieties. The cozy, lazy one in the morning when both were rushing, dressing up, searching for car keys or arguing about breakfast. The aching and sweet one after the whole day longing for each other. The burning with fire one, when they both needed to feed one another with a skin to skin hunger for a moan. And this one. Special, sealing the deal one. The kind of kiss that occurs rarely and you put your heart and soul into it, giving yourself up with no return. The one that lasts forever or should.

Surprisingly, it was Chloe who broke it off.

“Yeah. That was something I wanted to do then. So…” She said brushing off a piece of cig’s ash from the blonde hair. They both forgot about their smokes. “What’s your third thing?”

“My third thing? Ah. Uh. Well.” A deep breath was a challenge hard to complete. Gathering her thoughts even more. Rachel cleared her throat. “I applied to UMass, didn’t tell you shit, and I got in.”

Chloe blinked.

“What?”

“I got in.” That was why talking about Boston came so easily for Rachel. She already proceeded with plan B, suggested by no one other than her own wife. It would be repellent to insist on Harvard without a chance to even get waitlisted. UMass was still a painful evidence of the most remarkable failures in her life, but at least an option. “Not that it’s like a huge achievement or anything, but they took me on the spot. It’s not Harvard, but still, Boston campus, good Uni with a decent law program, and I will be…” Her cigarette was decisively taken away from her fingers. “Hey…” And thrown away. Chloe slid close to her, pulling her tighter and kissing her one more time. This time her lips were screaming fire. “Stop…” Rachel breathed in. “You’re breaking the rules. That’s not how you make your call.” Being pressed against the blue storm with her neck being kissed feverishly, the only choice was to give up.

“Winners set their own rules, Rach.” Her treasure whispered and then cupped her face in her hands. “I’m calling… Congrats?”

“Good call.”

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“Nathan… Please.” Kris whispered, desperately looking around. “Untie me. Please. Before he comes back!”

When Jefferson left the room, shutting the giant, heavy door after himself, she thought that her brother would either rush to free her or at least offer her some explanation, but so far he was just standing still, mumbling something to himself and scratching his own palms till the bloody tracks of his fingernails marked the skin. At first Kris was under the impression they had been watched but it didn’t seem to be the case. Nathan’s own mental state and extreme confusion were frightening though. Moving back and forth, pale as a wall, spilling, spinning and sometimes kicking the black couch in front of him. Her little brother was quite frankly losing his mind, literally. There was a touch of a misery in his behavior too, as if he was forced to do something he really didn’t want to
participate in and was more than reluctant about surrendering to his teacher’s will. There was no chance in hell this madness was his idea.

Not a chance.

“He won’t come back.” Taking a step back Nathan peered at Joshua who nonchalantly was sitting on the glass table, chewing on his favorite fruit and scrolling through his phone. Knowing his bolder, older brother, was probably setting up some debauched dates for later tonight. They had a job to do first, even if they could still consider it as a pleasure, at least Josh would. “It’s between us now. Only.” He quickly said to Kris but got silent when his other sibling moved his arms, stretched out and then took the stage, walking slowly to their outcasted, disgusting sister.

Nathan’s favorite person in the whole world.

“You didn’t change at all.” Josh greeted her, taking off his jacket and throwing it on the couch. The dark room was a freezing place, but all of them were sweating. Kris, as always, ignored his presence not aware her fate was already cooked up, with a detailed plan of the whole game and every step carefully discussed. “Funny.” He glanced at her, tilting his head to the right, then left and, out of nowhere, laughed out loud. Kris blinked, even more confused. “You still think you matter, huh?”

Nathan’s hands started to shake so much he had to hid them in the pockets to take any control over his body. Surprisingly, his jacket was also gone but he couldn’t recall when he took it off. Perhaps he left it in the car when they dragged Kris out. Yeah, that was probably it.

Suddenly, he got pushed so hard he lurched and staggered. It was a subtle way his brother communicated when he expected some engagement and friendly backup. If it depended on Josh, Kris would be already transformed, done, gone forever. Nathan had to man up though, it was his test of character and battle with his weakness. “Go on.” Josh rushed him, punching his arm again. “You chicken shit.”

And Nathan, with his eyes closed, lips trembling and palms closing into fists, obeyed. Broken, he was so fucking broken. Weak. He would agree to anything to be set free and simply be done with… Whatever needed to be done. One way or another.

“I thought that when you came back you did it because of me and that there is hope.” It was more a recitation of a memorized passage than a true confession. Nathan had problems to decide what was factual though. Was it his own inner voice, a soft and calm whisper of peace, or Joshua’s bold spot-on demands? “Like for us to reconnect like real beings, but then I got it.” He nodded slowly just like his better, braver, big brother. “You are not real. You’ve never been real, and it hurts.”

“She was never real.” Joshua repeated, spitting on the floor. A splash of bubbly saliva mixed with the dark juice and grape seeds started to soak in the carpet. Bitch didn’t even get scared, still trying to bite and attack like filthy, viscous animal. She should’ve known better though. She should’ve remembered every mad dog’s fate.

Her deep inhale was shaky, either from fear or irritation.

“I’m real.” Kris insisted, not really understanding what the whole thing was about. Sensing that calming down Nathan was her only chance to get out, she was trying to speak calmly and sound rational. Nothing was rational anymore though. Nothing. “I’m your sister, Nathan. Please.” She tried to wriggle out of her ties again but couldn’t make any progress. Without help she would be stuck here until…

Well, until they would get bored, she guessed.
“You know what’s really funny?” Walking in circles, Joshua was coming close to her and then getting back to the wall of shadows, like a boxer in an invisible ring. He even trotted a bit, preparing for the first strike. His opponent was powerless and feeble though, not really a competition but that was how he liked it. Fair fights were way too overrated. “That you keep demanding things, even if held hostage and helpless. You think that you can order me around like one of your whores. You think I’m just a worthless piece of shit!” He almost hit her but stopped his hand an inch from her face. Feeding on the fear in her eyes, Josh giggled, tangling her hair slowly, terrifying her even more with his supposed soft side.

“It’s not her fault!” Nathan tried to drag him back but got pushed away. “She was just programmed like that!”

“So, it’s time to turn the systems down.” His brother smiled, finally letting Kris’s hair go. Her head got pushed aside like she was a living doll. “All of them.”

“What systems? You’re scaring me.” Their sister finally started to panic. “Is this… Is this…” Trying any kind of reasonable explanation was an absurd. Why would he tie up his own sister on Valentine’s day? With what purpose in mind? Who would scare her to death yelling those bizarre claims? She didn’t even wonder about Jefferson’s motivations already labelling him as a dangerous lunatic, but little Nat was a different story. “Is it because we… didn’t spend much time together?” Her voice broke down to a whine when she took her guess, afraid her brother wouldn’t give any more chances.

The idea that this whole thing was just an elaborated hoax, was fading away quickly though. The number of red flags was piling up and her brother was acting more and more bizarre. At the beginning, Kris assumed there had been some kind of accident, maybe a car crash and Nathan somehow used this opportunity to drag her to this eccentric dungeon. Perhaps they didn’t have any other choice or maybe it was just part of the play, the beginning of which she had missed, spacing out or simply fainting. Working so hard lately, Kris hadn’t been sleeping much nor eating properly. So she could’ve been just weak and anemic, right? Bullshit. The more she thought about it, even if still lightheaded and with her sight blurry, the less it made sense.

She was drugged and brought here on purpose.

“Time? You don’t even know what it means!” Her brother went on another rant, switching personalities from a shy kid to arrogant asshole. “You pushed and pulled, promised and never delivered, just drowning yourself, swimming in this swamp of your own weaknesses. I can teach you how to swim, you know? I really can.” Josh giggled and turned around almost in a pirouette. “I’m good at it. Kristen Prescott, always so proud, looking down on others but being eaten out inside by her own flaws and sick needs. You need to accept who you are. We will help you to accept it!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Feeling the headache coming back, she frowned trying to stay sane. This was madness though, but Kris wasn’t sure if she was losing it or her sibling was. The more Nathan talked, the crazier it sounded. If that was supposed to be a riddle, she needed a solid hint.

“That I’m done with fake smiles. I want to show you the real one. Your turn.” Getting bored, Josh turned over to his brother. This whole performance was just for him after all. “Tell her.”

“Now?” Nathan got even more pale.

“Yes, now.” He almost got slapped by Josh again. Mark allowed them to have a final word with her, graciously letting him take over, but would not tolerate any mistakes or missteps. His brother wouldn’t bear it either. “Don’t you fuck it up. Once you say it aloud it would be easier.”
Nathan’s shirt was soaking wet from sweat. Shuddering and quivering he paced in place, trying to grow some courage. How did one build self-esteem? Could it be built on fear and coercion? Or perhaps he could just borrow some from Josh? Could you be forced to be brave? He had seen so many of those young girls change into objects and then pushed into the abyss of art, making them serve a bigger role. He was special, but he didn't feel like it. Now, Nathan Prescott would give anything to just become ordinary guy, one of those pathetic, regular folks that everybody despised.

“Alright.” He nodded, licking his lips. “You… You are… You are nothing to me. And…” Every word felt like a painful vomit. Sick to his stomach, Nathan started shaking more, afraid of Josh’s punishment. He had never practiced this part of his speech, hoping it would never go that far. This hope was far-fetched, since Josh always got what he wanted. “You’ll never be anything more than just a piece of dirt. Like… And I feel bad so bad that I trusted you, I think you are real or could be part of me.”

“I’m part of you.” Kris responded at once. No hesitation, no meltdown, no nervous stumbling on words. That was the truth she believed in. “I always wanted the best for you!”

“Lies!” Joshua hissed. “All lies. You came back for her. To Gingrich!”

“You said you came back for me and it was just a lie.” Nathan echoed, thankful for the point made by his sibling. She couldn’t trick them into another empty promise.

Tired of the constant yelling and accusations, Kris lowered her head spacing out and escaping into her own mind. The mouthful responses were just frying her brain and making her dizzier. Blocking out Nathan’s screams wasn’t easy but still feeling the drug in her bloodstream, she somehow succeeded, floating on the outskirts of awareness. Steph. She should take her sailing, just like her parents a long time ago when times were simpler and easier. Just the two of them against the bay, with the whole world to conquer. Steph would like it, Kris thought randomly, like making plans was still an option. Take her far away. Safe.

Keep her at bay.

Noticing her girlfriend got mentioned, she opened her eyes, fully alerted. Was he planning to do similar thing to Steph? Fuck no. No. Never.

“No. It was just a coincidence. I came back for you. I’m sorry.” Admitting her mistakes usually soften him up. Groveling should work even better. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you. I will. I promise. I will.”

Ready to pledge everything he needed, she looked around, noticing her sight got used to the dark a bit, and the series of black and white photos hanging out the wall were easier to decipher. Young girls with their blank, empty sight lying on the floor with hands and legs tied. One after another, modeled in similar poses, with lips half-open, and gray, blind eyes unconscious and lifeless. A masquerade of art lined up in dozens of parallel shots, with the same internal scream visible screaming from hundreds of dead eyes.

She wasn’t the first.

“Bullshit. What were you thinking?” Joshua laughed. “That we wouldn’t notice?”

“Who is we?” Kris asked, still staring at the walls. So many of them. All so young.

She got hit in the face so hard, that her lip exploded in red.

“Ignorance won’t help you, bitch.” Shaking his hand Joshua jogged away, very pleased with
himself. He got her; she didn’t even notice. Oh, he had wanted to do it for years and now she was just glaring at him with this stupid look on her face. Screaming and whistling in excitement, he began to run in circles, jumping up every other step. It was childish and all, but he deserved some fun.

It needed to be fun!

“You did everything for her and nothing for me!” Seeing her hurt, Nathan started crying. It didn’t matter how hard he tried to stop; the tears ran down his cheek like two unstoppable, salty creeks. “I’m your brother!” He wept, drooling a bit. “You supposed to think about me! Me!”

Spitting and snorting, Kris got fed up.

“You want me to break up with her? Is that it?”

“Would you do it?” Surprised, Nathan forgot about his hysteria. If she promised, like really promised, perhaps his brother would turn things around and no test would be needed? He knew it was impossible, but if Kris really tried this time…

“Yeah, would you?” Joshua got interested. “If we offer to let you go, would you call your little slut and tell her to get the fuck out?”

Shaking her head, Kris wanted to laugh. After being locked down for hours in this artsy chamber, they finally got to the point. She was stupid enough to believe Nathan really wanted to seriously hurt her, but apparently the only thing he wanted was the same shit that her father asked for. It would have to take more than a bleeding lip to let her Steph go.

Way more.

“So that’s what it is about? Nice Valentine’s day, little brother. You stink of Prescott power now. He trained you so well.” She was referring to their father, but Nathan smiled proudly thinking of a different teacher. That made her more furious and way less careful. “You can’t get what you want, or you have to wait a bit, so you just jail people, tie them up to blackmail them? You’re such a piece of shit, Nat. Just a fucking maniac. You think that you can just stand here with your grim smile and threaten me? I’m not one of your toys, I’m your sister!”

“You are not!”

Breathing heavily, Kris didn’t speak out for a good minute. Nathan got worried that she had a heart attack or something, but it wasn’t the case. This discussion was just a waste of breath indeed and her mouth was hurting. Lastly, raising her head she looked directly at him. Not at Joshua, not in the space or in an unidentified direction. At him.

“Untie me, Nathan.” She said simply.

“He’s not the one to make that call and he can’t set you free.” Ready to hit her again, Josh leaped forward but got stopped by Nathan. They wrestled a bit, scoffing, growling and barking at each other, and somehow the younger brother won this fight, pushing him back. “It’s ok.” Shaking off like a dog after a good run, Josh pointed at her. “We can cure you. Change you. It’s ok.” He touched her cheek, not bothered by the blood on his fingers. “Set you free. I can make you real, I can change you to someone that would matter. Transform you and myself.”

Something in his voice made Kris terrified. Deadly scared.

“Stop it.” She warned him but her voice was shaking.
“You are nothing to me.” Nathan yelled back, finding himself so close to her, even if he was standing ten feet away. How did he get here? “Nothing. Nothing. Nothing!” He considered the old trick for a moment, to count to ten and make his brother disappear again, but was too afraid Josh would really leave, like he almost had done last time. It took Nathan three weeks to bring him back. Three weeks of a lonely, pure hell. “I’m so sorry.” He whispered softly hoping his brother didn’t hear it. “I’m so, so sorry…”

There was no choice. One road. One track.

Joshua laughed, walking to the desk.

“That’s the end of the ride, you see? That’s the end. Sorry, big sis.” Whistling the well-known melody, he started to prepare. Mark did a lot, but Joshua had a way better idea how to solve this issue. His teacher’s transformations always seemed boring. The objects were just put asleep like good, tired puppies. Josh wanted something spectacular, something worth remembering and entertaining. Something really special. “You know what to do.” He said handing something to Nathan. “And you better not miss this time.”

When her brother approached slowly, she finally noticed what he was holding in his shaking hands. It wasn’t a syringe with a needle, that Kris hoped to miss or fight with if needed. It was a gun, a real gun. The same weapon she had seen in her father’s office when she ransacked his precious desk to find some charity papers. The same that her brother was staring at greedily many times but never dared to touch. Never, till this very day.

“No.” Kris’s eyes grew bigger in panic. This time it wasn’t a joke. “Nat, please, no. You’re better than this. You can fight it. You can do it.” Blurting words didn’t stop him. He took another step, still avoiding her begging sight. “Look at me. Please, please.” Her desperate plea was drowning in the loud whistle. Main theme of ‘The sound of the music’ was always making Nathan calmer and more focused. “We can work it out. I promise. We can do it. We…” The tip of the cold, metal barrel to her forehead cut it short.

Kris gasped.

“I’m not Nathan, Kris.” Her brother said with his finger slowly tightening on the trigger. “I’m Joshua.”

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“Damn, it’s so fucking dark. I can’t see shit.” Chuckling, Chloe turned around, surprised at how dark the wagon had become. The candles died in between one speedy turn and another spin, so they got used to be lit up only by the starry sky. When the car door got closed to save them from the cold and the whistling wind, they found each other hugged by the pitch-black curtain of blindness. Finding one another was yet another hassle.

At first, the blue pirate regretted her decision to close them up with no source of light but hearing Rachel’s giggle her heart jumped. There was something alluring in seeking her other half in this dark room of sorts, alone but not lonely, with a happy end granted.

“Then you will have to find me.” Her wife whispered somewhere in the darkness.

Lost a bit without the burning, hazel smile, Chloe reached for her meeting nothing. Following a soft
whisper of flannel and subtle squeals of the floor under the blonde steps, she started her hunt, at first hoping it would take a second. Rachel escaped once, then again, daring to be found. Alright. A true challenge then. Chloe grinned. But then she took one guess, then another, and her hands remained empty. Yet one more attempt of a seize, same result. The space was limited though, it shouldn’t be that hard by any means, but somehow, they both liked to prolong this game. Her girl loved games though, along with acting and bending the truth, this time adding darkness to the mix. With confusion and excitement growing, Chloe tried again, but got deceived. Somebody tapped her arm, so she turned around, but not fast enough.

Rachel giggled.

Finding her way around, the blue closed her eyes breathing deeply and following the sounds. Not an easy task with the constant train’s patter, but she tuned it out focusing on the trailer noise. The shadows were too misleading anyway and fighting with her eyesight still not accustomed to the dark was taking forever. Listening closely, Chloe paused for a second. Nothing. Just a rustle, then a chuckle and a quiet laughter. Waiting in place, she could feel the spark of touch, or rather its promise, reminding herself the right moment was about to come. Then she bounced back and leaped forward, unfortunately almost losing balance. Not her fault though. The wagon’s wooden walls shook heavily with another rapid turn and Chloe stumbled upon one of the boxes, kicking one of the glasses down. Damn it.

This shrilling sound confused Rachel, so she stopped in place, giving up this hide-and-seek challenge at once. Chloe didn’t waste her chance this time, cornering her and pressing against the still trembling wall. Maybe they were both shuddering a bit though, so hungry for each other.

“I will always find you.” The blue whisper brushed Rachel’s ear, followed by another deep, intense kiss. No awkward teen, shocked by the fact that her new and first girlfriend ever could be turned on as hell by some awkward and obstinate approach, no tongue-tied perplexity, but a grown-up pirate who knew exactly how to steer this fever. New and old, always tempting.

Damn, some joy was about to happen, Rachel sensed the blue, bold smile on her lips and gave up completely. Some particular fire was coming, brewing up already, to cover all the worries, problems and half-truths and shake the ground in a special, well-known way. Well, about time.

Wasn’t that what Valentine’s Day was about?

Click. Clunk. Clack. Approved the train, now slowing down as their hearts started racing.

Discovering her girl anew and guided only by a breath or a moan, Rachel was slowly taking over. Through pulling pointy spikes of hair and touching to sensitive skin, she evoked a blue pant, asking kindly not to wait so long. Kiss, another one, this time to Chloe’s neck, her reacting with every fiber of her body. Smile. Moan. Inhale. There was something weirdly alluring in the common blindfold and lack of sight they were sharing.

Suddenly, Rachel frowned. Liberating her treasure from tons of extremely trivial things called clothes was usually the less memorable stage of the process, but this time some sort of surprise was awaiting her.

“Are you wearing lace?” She had to ask to make sure, but damn, it was damn obvious what she just discovered.

Gratefully, the blackness of the wagon ate up Chloe’s blush. There was no question it had appeared and probably would stay for a longer while.
“It’s Valentine’s for fuck’s sake…” She mumbled, thankful for the lack of light and a bit disappointed that a nice Chloe wasn’t presented in a more visual way. Maybe it was for the best though. This pitch-dark thing wasn’t that bad after all though. The gift was discovered with minimum questions asked. Or comments.

Rachel gasped, knowing for a fact that any kind of lingerie was always her duty and it was close to impossible to even ask Chloe for such a step. Not that she really wanted it, enjoying her pirate’s style, but damn, that was surprising. And hot. Her beautiful poor treasure tortured herself for the whole evening for this one moment. Turning red, Rachel wanted to crack a joke, but found herself unable to, already too consumed by attraction to think straight. Actually, to think at all, full stop.

“Oh…”

“Just shut up…” Chloe mumbled.

Click. Clunk. Clack. The train laughed.

Kiss, another kiss, gasp and they both started traveling through this one, fast-paced road of no return. No turning back, no stops or crossroads. No traffic lights or obstacles. Click. Clunk. Clack. One track. Chloe demanding another kiss and getting one. Speeding. Turn, pause and more speed. The same pace as the railway’s. Faster.

Taking her and guided only through the sharp breath, grasp of fingers and tons of invisible sparks, Rachel evoked her expectations and longings when they had been taking this train ride for the first time ever. The flavor of Chloe’s skin she imagined, the taste of their first kiss and its circumstances, the way she would smile, hiding her bliss. How much more it was different from reality and how compelling. Now, she had her blue treasure melting under her touch, reacting to every small twitch and teased pause. Breath and pant, skin against skin, the sharp spikes of hair. Playing badass, her blue treasure was now so sensitive, so fragile, giving herself away with no fear or apprehension. That was how the blue self-esteem was born though, Rachel thought randomly, not stopping the kiss and having her girl in her power. Through dedication and love. Years of hard work.

Click. Clunk. Clack.

Her amazing pirate wrapped herself around the touch even more. There was nothing more amazing than feeling her so close to heaven, leading and protecting in a greedy but totally selfless way. It took a moment longer to get her there, and Chloe weakened in her arms, panting hard and shaking.

“I got you.” Rachel bought her back. “I’m here.”

Click. Clunk. Clack.

There was a series of sharp inhales, and then one, long, final gasp. Slowing down wasn’t an option for this wild, crazy drive. The blue sensitivity changed its flavor, as Chloe immediately strived for some payback. This revenge was more than anticipated though. No obstacles, no search, no games to play. The lack of sight was actually helping though, making it better and richer. Rachel closed her eyes, drowning in darkness again, but the abyss was harmless, safe. She was needed, protected, wanted. The train puffed and wheezed. Nothing wrong with it. The rhythm got a bit stronger. Nothing bad would ever happen, even if they both got locked in the empty carriage running through the night.

This darkness was safe.

The fuzzy obscurity, the sound of the railway running into the night, the harsh surface of the
wagon’s floor. Chloe’s hand under her shirt, an impatient gasp when she couldn’t deal with the bra clasp. Usually Rachel would giggle, perhaps even push her away for a second, playing hard to get, but this time she didn’t want to waste a second. With their eyes closed and deprived from looking at each other, they could only guess each other’s wishes, composing this moment from scraps of breaths and heated touches. Turn. The tracks drumming. The blockers squeaking trying to break. No breaking. Suddenly this absurd, silly need appeared, to be closer, feel her with every nerve, clock herself around her, make her more hers.

Click. Clunk. Clack.

Rachel moaned.

She dragged her closer, hungry, no, actually starving for the skin to skin touch, in need for some the blue insanity. Her pirate was losing her mind again, already drunk on every move, sharp breath and a feverish grasp. Wind hitting the sides of the cart. This steel hum of train’s wheels. Click. Clunk. Clack. Faster. The steady but wild pace adding fuel to the fire. Rachel wanted to say something, but couldn’t find her voice, lost somewhere with her vision and the must to keep going. Close, they were close.

Click. Clunk. Clack.

Her last moan was loud, but silent, muted by the noise of steel train tracks’ rattle.

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Silence. Drumming silence, broken in half by half-pitch, hardly audible screech drilling in his ears, muffling the world outside and replacing it with the steel, cold numbness. Splatters of blood. White flash. A foot in a sneaker laying on the ground. Not moving. Nothing was moving. Joshua said something, but he couldn’t hear him, maybe didn’t want to. Flash. Mark working, moving around like a fuming wasp. His hand flickering on the shutter. White shirt with this little rush of dark spatters. Usually, the sound of the lenses shrinking was very distinctive, loud, powerful. Now nothing. Not a sound. Just this foot, a foot not moving. Black laces, red and white stripes of leather. Dirty soil. Just by a chair, that mercifully fell on the other side hiding the real horror but not stopping the river of red rivulets. Panting heavily, Nathan took a step back, scared by the black barrel of a gun, now peacefully placed on the glass table. It looked just like one of his toys, as dangerous as a teddy bear or dancing monkey, shaped like one of the weapons but entirely harmless. So, it was a dream then, he thought. What a relief. What a nightmare to even imagine what they were about to do.

The barrel was still hot. Nathan pressed harder just to make sure not worrying his fingertips would get burned or scarred. If this reality was for him to control, it should get cold in a second just in a snap, just because he thought so. The pistol remained hot, burning, sizzling even, despite his efforts.

Then he noticed the splashes of blood, more blood, contrasting harshly with the white finish of the photo screen backdrop. Static. Quiet. Numb. Flash. Mark was still working.

“…essive.” The sound was slowly getting back, repapering and refurbishing slowly. Getting up and turning off the lights, his mentor opened the display screen on his camera going through the newly acquired photos. He was taking shot after shot for a few minutes if not hours, documenting their last project with every detail, aspect, and angle. As always when captivated by his work, he hadn’t said
much yet, leaving his opinion till the job was done. Apparently, he was pleased though. “Truly impressive. What you dared to do was essential in its form and shape, confident and fearless. Exceptional.” Click, slide. “Brilliant.” Slide. “Brave.” Slide, slide, slide. Click. Nathan closed his eyes embracing the high-pitch sound, trying to escape, run away to his cozy place, safe harbor but there weren’t any. The step was taken. It was done. “The way you recreated her, changed into something she would never become was unbelievable. This is truly a work of high art. Your art.” He felt Mark’s hand on his shoulder. “You’re truly a special person, Nathan. I’m proud of you.”

The blood didn’t look that scary on black and white photographs.

“Are you?” He whispered, thinking about the foot, not the person but one shoe still there. Stiff. Calm. Peaceful.

“We have to hide her.” Joshua appeared from the dark, leaping closer, hungry for more visuals. Always applauding Jefferson’s actions, he was the first to look at the display. Whistling in wonder, he grinned a few times widely, spitting a few grape seeds. Jefferson winced. He hated this habit of his favorite. “I was thinking the bay, just make her swim.” Cheerfully, like awaiting another adventure, Joshua turned back to their teacher. “Can we make her swim?”

The silence got worse when his brother dragged Nathan nearer and forced him to watch and absorb every detail. It was their project, their greatest creation, the final cut. Click after click, slide following by slide, they watched their sister or rather what remained of her, sinking in a dark, paddle of blackness. A calm, dark surface of the ocean, not touched by a gust of wind or misshapen by a random wave. The persuasive noise got so high, that Nathan got dizzy, expecting a nose bleed or his ears exploding.

She was swimming already, he wanted to say, but couldn’t. Swimming. Floating. Diving. She was gone. There was no she.

Just the shoe.

With a finger pressed against his chin, Mark pondered for a moment, considering this option. Both Joshua and Nathan knew for a fact, he loved sailing almost as much as his art, escaping the dreary existence in Arcadia in his boat and striving for lonely journeys. Just him, the stars and Pacific, a perfect trio that helped him to focus. Wouldn’t it be great to include his newest transformation in his second favorite passion?

“Marrying her with the waves of the bay is a beautiful idea, however…” Mark winced. “It’s way too risky.” Transporting the body to the harbor and dragging it to the yacht, especially in a day when the whole city was celebrating was blatantly stupid. Even if tempted, he had to put this idea to rest. “First, we have to remember to cover the tracks.” He reminded Nathan, walking quickly to the pile of things once belonged to Kris. “You have to be safe from those who wouldn’t understand or appreciate.” Opening her purse, he began to search it but became annoyed quickly and just threw out all the junk on the glass table. A few coins, make-up stuff, notes, bills, and the mobile in a dark, leather case. “It that her phone? What’s the password?”

“0711” Josh responded at once. He always knew everything. “Gingrich’s birthday.”

Both brothers walked to Jefferson who started scrolling through the messages grimacing a bit. Even if pretty good with technology it took him a moment to find the right icon and the list of conversations. Circed by his students, he started typing in a hurry.

Sorry. Something came up. I had to catch last minute flight to NYC.
Joshua shook his head.

“Let me.” He said reaching for the phone. Jefferson didn’t protest, passing him the device.

It was a mistake. I need some time. Will get back to U when I feel ready. Getting to NYC and will stay there with friends. Sorry.

“You don’t want this girl to think that something is off.” One click and it got sent. Joshua threw the phone on the couch, grabbing more grapes and putting them all in his mouth. Chewing loudly, he grinned one more time, showing blackened teeth and spitting with the juice.

Mark nodded. It sounded believable, better, less conspicuous. As Nathan had mentioned a few days ago when they planned the whole operation, his sister had been going through some problems in the so-called relationship. Young lovers of his objects were usually bigger problems than parents who knew close to nothing about their children, especially during the high school times. Steph Gingrich wouldn’t have any reason to look for her mate then.

“Perhaps we should…” Nathan stumbled upon his own words. “We should bury her with the other one?” He suggested, not believing he was actually able to say it. Everything was better than this foot, this shoe still in within his sight.

“Yeah. Good idea. And good job, Nathan.” He hardly could hear Jefferson talking. “Good job, son. You’re driving.”

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The train yanked, hummed, puffed and rested on its breaks with a loud metal squeak and another whizzer.

“Fuck.” Rachel was the first to sit back, listening closely. “I think it stopped.” Gathering her clothes as quickly as never before, she pressed them to her chest just in case somebody would open the door. The blankets could serve as a sheet, not a cover, not to mention she would have to make a choice between sitting her naked ass on the wooden floor and a doubtful shield. And there was some broken glass up there, thanks to some blue lack of grace.

Chloe was way less cautious, standing up and putting on her pants, this time not even bothered by her underwear. Suffering for half a day with this monstrosity in the form of sexy lingerie was enough. Yes, gross, but this red lace almost cut her in half during the hike. So, fuck it, laundry existed.

“Shit.” She whispered trying to take a sneak peek of the outside and met only with pitch darkness.

“Do you know where we are?”

“Hopefully, Seattle. Or Canada.” Rachel inhaled nervously, trying to find her bra somewhere between the crust of pizza, empty glasses of wine and the rest of mess they had left behind. “I lost track of time.” She confessed shyly. They lost track of time, falling asleep naked in each other’s arms, hugged to sleep by the monotonous song of the railway. The whole journey was planned only for a few stops, with an easy return. Walking home was off the table at the moment though. “Now I have to figure out how to get back.” She pondered. If they landed in the Emerald City, it should be easy to find a bus, even with a few stops. If it was indeed Vancouver, B.C, it might be pretty problematic, since Rachel wasn’t up to paying 30 bucks for tickets though or rather wouldn’t be able
to. Uber or any other kind of cab was out of the question for the same reason. Not to mention neither of them had passports or enhanced driver licenses, available in Washington state only. So, walking for days, hitchhiking or catching another illegal train ride not jump-free this time, were their only solutions.

Damn it.

Her blue pirate shook her head, kneeling in front of her and handing her the lost bra. Helping her wife to find all the pieces of clothing she didn’t care about her nakedness, smirking a bit at her girl’s tenseness. When the blonde dignity was somehow secured, she cupped Rachel’s face in her hands and kissed very, very slowly. Her wife blinked, not sure of the reasons for such delay, but then melted under the blue, loving sight. It was alright, her pirate was saying, having the conversation with her eyes only. It would be more than fine, her lips promised. Suddenly, the dirty floor of the wooden wagon, the panic about getting caught or even travel back home became meaningless. Nonexistent.

“Who cares about coming back?” Chloe whispered just before another deep kiss happened.

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So that was it. A text message, not even a call. Few words, a few commas, period, the end. Something that she felt was coming, or secretly hoping for, now became a reality, sorely throbbing and overpoweringly painful. It came just after she had convicted herself that they would make it work, they had a chance in this world to bend their ways and look forward to something greater, bigger and brighter. It wasn’t an easy battle to win with herself, but she managed, finally vowing to forget about Max and moving forward like she was expected to do.

Now, Steph was in the dark. Partly because she felt like she should care more and that was killing her inside as well. Being dumped on Valentine’s day should be more seriously way troubling, but even if hurt, she felt numb, not caring just like this whole bleep, message, blight screen on her phone, the brutal consequences of it was just a movie she was watching not living through it. Did Kris do it because of her? Was Steph to blame, because of all her doubts and outburst of anger? Was she just acting childish and Kris got fed up? Even if announced as a temporary separation, just a break to spend time with some New York friends, a short, reasonable pause, was more or less permanent. Couples rarely got back together after such a thing. Especially if they couldn’t find common ground. Especially if it got declared on Valentine’s.

Fucking pink shitty festive. She hated this day.

Perhaps it was for the best though, maybe it wasn’t an entirely bad idea. It was better to stop this fake madness, avoiding another evening filled with walking on eggshells and promises that led nowhere. It was nice to fantasize about the secret beach spot, prepare flowers and a few chocolate surprises, but deep down she had known it wouldn’t be appreciated anyway. Moreover, earlier today Steph indeed hoped for something similar to happen, but when it actually did occur, she felt like shit.

Her fault. Fuck. Not her fault.

Dark. It was so dark and cold today. Even the stars decide to ditch her hiding behind the sharp-shaped clouds. Wandering for hours, Steph noticed she reached Blackwell, subconsciously trying to get back home. Home, well, funny word. It had lost its meaning a long time ago since she was either
staying with the Norths, her parents, Kris and sometimes even sleeping in her van. Quite a hobo solution but everything was better than being driven up the wall with people prying, questioning, requesting things.

Walking towards the main building, she noticed Max standing close to the main dorm gate. Steph sighed, close to a meltdown. Not this, not again. This time the little freckle was entirely alone, probably waiting for somebody to come out or just catching the last breath of night air before her bedtime. The dawn would break in a few hours starting another school day, so it was time to catch on sleep or just manage to nap before the classes. Hopefully, Max didn’t sneak out for a smoke, getting into this terrible habit with full force, Steph though and then scolded herself with a sneer. Even if though, it wasn’t anybody’s business anymore.

The fact that Max couldn’t sleep either didn’t even cross Steph’s mind.

She lowered her head, wishing not to be noticed yet again and slip by hiding in the shadows. The backyard was significantly lit though, so not an easy task in the dead, empty area. The maze of paths felt like thorny, convoluted railway, with trails trailblazed and set in iron, limiting her options and choices. Take one and stick to it, she thought, knowing that going across would be even more suspicious. Picking the longer route, she turned left, trying to walk around Max and made it easier for both of them, but then with the corner of her eye, she noticed that some shadows just moved.

Steph stopped by the crossroads, not sure if it was just her imagination or the fact she was mostly enjoying the view of her old, dirty converses, but then she heard fast steps, somebody’s quick breath, and sensed the smell she had known so well mixed with some beer and smoke. Different, a bit distant but still more than familiar. Afraid a bit, she lifted her head and met the sight of the girl she couldn’t stop thinking about.

“Hi.” Max smiled stepping forward.

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