Another Version of the Truth

by DarkdannyFF

Summary

Perhaps all it would take is a controlled burn to keep the raging fire of Rachel Amber from burning away everything and everyone she loves. For Chloe Price, anything that could save her is worth a shot, even if it drastically alters everything forever...
In spite of current popular opinion about him, James Amber did indeed love his daughter.

He was not a perfect Father. Oh, he had to present that face for the people of Arcadia Bay, but under the surface which the outside world got to see and judged accordingly, was a man who lived in constant doubt and fear of what would happen when his secrets got out; and last night thanks to the resourcefulness and sheer guile of his daughter and her… friend… his most potentially damaging one was now being aired out publicly in his family… for Rachel.

… And for this Chloe Price as well…

He had done some background digging into Chloe Price after the meeting with Ray Wells over Rachel and her skipping school. While he had lost his temper on the girl – for which he fully intended to apologize for - she was still a troubled girl, with justifiable reasons to look at the world in such a pessimistic fashion. She had lost her father, William, in a collision with a semi-truck. It wasn’t long after that that everything went off the rails for the girl. Now here they were. She was expelled from Blackwell, apparently deep into recreational drug use and was now the center of fascination for Rachel.

*Center of fascination*… an understatement to be sure. A euphemism he was using so that he didn’t have to think too much about what their actual out of left field friendship was.

Or the noises that came from Rachel’s bedroom last night.

James exhaled as he mentally bleached his fleeting thought of the unspeakable. It wasn’t some panic over his daughter being apparently gay, it was the fact she brought someone she was seeing (apparently) and did things in his house… in *her* childhood bedroom.

Sure, he might have done the exact same thing when he was her age… Okay, he did do those things… but this was different. This time *he* was the father of the girl in question!

When he dealt with this Sera situation, he supposed he was going to have to sit Chloe Price down and have the same conversation he would have to have in her place. Girl or not, it was only right she got to endure the scrutiny of a disapproving father.

Hell, it might even be fun...

Closing the car door behind him with one hand, the other pushing his hair back, James stepped casually towards the somewhat run down Price home. It had the potential to be a fine house in itself, but it was clear to him whatever pride they had in their home was diminished at the loss of William Price. It was an understandable state of affairs.

The familiar hum from his smart phone caught his attention briefly. He grabbed it from his jack and tapped the message service.

*Rose* - James, Rachel is still at home. What are you doing?

*You* - I'm dealing with the Price situation right now. Talk soon.
Turning his phone off, James stepped up to the front door and stood there for a moment to recollect his momentum. To give himself a moment to figure out just how he was going to present himself to the Price household: concerned parent, or DA.

With that, James knocked on the door and dropped his hand back to his side.

It only took a moment before the door opened. Standing there in front of him was a middle aged woman whom he had met the day before in Ray Well’s office. Joyce, if he remembered clearly. She dressed in her work clothing and looked exhausted; her eyes were puffy and red from spending last night crying. For what reason, James certainly already knew. He could appreciate the sentiment; it had been a rough evening.

Silently James watched as an understandable flash of annoyance cut through Joyce’s miserable expression and streaked over her face as she stood in the doorway. Her arms crossed over her chest as she looked him over. She was angry, but too prideful to admit that to him right off the bat. James could see why she harboured this feeling for him. He did not foster good will from her for his apathy to her daughter’s plight and his natural inclination to defend his daughter from any and all accusations levelled at her.

While that was the case less than 24 hours ago, recent events made it clear that Rachel was to blame for the school ditching, and that Chloe Price made it her business to protect Rachel from punishment. It was very… noble… stupid, no doubt to place your education so low in favour of another person… but it was very noble of the girl.

It was clear to James now that Ray was a serious opportunist. He walked into that meeting with the sole intention to weed out a troublemaker, even if it meant believing the utter bullshit Chloe Price fed him. Ray was, at his core, a good guy but he overinflated his position and worth; and while Ray was well within his rights to boot Chloe if even a quarter of his suspicions were rooted in fact, but surely he should have been able to see the girl needed help and display of some compassion.

As the two of them stared at one another in silence, James stepped forward. His hand extending out to the woman. He decided there and then he would be the concerned father this time.

“Mrs. Price?” he spoke to her in an upbeat tone. “Yesterday we met under difficult circumstances, so please allow me to reintroduce myself; my name James Amber.”

The woman remained locked in place for a good long moment as she observed the DA standing in front of her with his hand still outstretched. James had to admit to himself that he was impressed. She’d make a fine police interrogator.

“Joyce…” he repeated once again as bright as he could produce. “Well then, I insist you call me James. I can see you’re heading out, so I apologize for waylaying you. I was hoping to have a chat with your daughter, Chloe. But it is good to catch you here as well.”

Looking at James wearily for a moment longer, Joyce stepped out of the doorway and gestured the man to step into the home. Offering Joyce a half smile, James stepped into the home and watched as Joyce stepped past him and planted herself in front of the staircase.
“Chloe Elizabeth Price! Get down here!” she hollered up stairs.

A string of profanity erupted from the bedroom, and Joyce rolled her eyes. Silently she gestured James to follow her, which he did down the hallway and into the small living room. As Joyce took a seat at the dining table, he did as well. The two of them remained locked in a state of silence, the only noise was the sound of boots stamping above them.

A door slammed and then the boots came down the staircase and through the hallway and sure enough standing there was none other than the object of his daughter’s affection, Chloe Price. She looked as though she had something smart to say to her mother, but the moment it was obvious just who her mother was keeping company with she froze, her mouth slightly agape as she stood there.

Silently James took in girl. She was different than the day prior, more denim, a beanie and peculiarly, one of her bangs was streaked with blue. James exhaled and remained steadfastly silent as he looked at the walking stereotype. One night with his daughter and… this happened.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she demanded as soon as she found it in herself to speak, her arms crossing over her chest as her eyes narrowed at James like he had already done something offensive.

“Chloe manners…” Joyce immediately snapped at her daughter as she too stared at her daughter’s transformation. “…and what did you do to your hair?”

The girl did not reply to her mother. The girl did not so much as offer a glance to her mother. After last night, it was clear Chloe was in the ‘fuck James for lying’ club of which it seemed everyone in his life was a member.

Whatever… he could work with that.

“Chloe, could you please join us?” James requested, gesturing to the seat next to Joyce.

It did not take long for the combined pressure coming from both Joyce and himself to collapse upon Chloe. Rolling her eyes, Chloe stepped forward and slumped down into the seat next to her mother. She still made it a point to remain lock eyed with James. He had to respect the sort of strength this had. Few people ever could look him straight in the eye; came with his position.

Lacing his fingers together as hands rested on the table top, James turned his focus to Joyce, who sat there completely at a loss of words for why it was he was here.

“First, Joyce, I wanted to apologize for any undue worry you might have had for your daughter,” James spoke to the mother in a steadied tone. “I do not know the extent of what she told you, but she was at our home having dinner with us. She helped mitigate an unfortunate incident, and my wife and I are very grateful to have had Chloe here helping out Rachel out through this issue.”

Stunned by what she had heard, Joyce turned her focus to Chloe who conspicuously became bashful at James’ not exactly true version of events.

“Oh, Chloe, why didn’t you say something?” Joyce breathed to her daughter. “You could have at least texted.”

Unable, or unwilling to look her mother in the eye, Chloe could only shrug.
"I know…” she said as she decided to play along with James. “It wasn’t in my place to talk about it…”

“Do not understate the importance you had on getting Rachel through last night,” James faux chastised her for being modest. He turned to Joyce and added. “Your daughter did something very sweet in staying with Rachel as she did. Rose and I greatly appreciate her for being there.”

Joyce looked to her daughter, and for the first time since this little meeting began, Chloe looked at her mother. The expression on her face was locked in a state of neutrality, like she did not want to be this much of a focus in the first place.

What was much more important was Joyce’s reaction. For the first time pride seemed to registered on the woman’s face. It was exactly what James wanted right now.

“Well, that’s my Chloe… apparently…” Joyce spoke, still a little startled. She turned back to James and added. “May I get you a cup of coffee, Mr. Amber?”

James brought a smile to his face once again.

“I believe I said my name was James; and yes, thank you very much. Black, one sugar,” he spoke with a casual lightness that earned an easing laugh from Joyce. “Your daughter and mine have become quite fast friends; as such I think it’s only right to invite you over to our home one night for dinner with both families... I imagine it might be something they would want, right Chloe?”

The inference was obvious to all parties but Joyce, who had retreated from the kitchen to pour the two of them a cup of coffee. It gave James a moment watch in silence as Chloe shifted uncomfortably in front of him. She finally seemed to get that whatever going on between Rachel and she was far more obvious than they thought it was. That the man sitting across from was the father of the girl she was… interested in.

Yes… It looked like she was going to get dad interrogation one of these days. Female or not, he would not be deprived of his right as a father.

“Well I possibly couldn’t come empty handed…” Joyce’s voice spoke up, cutting through the tension she did not notice. “You have your wife tell me what I should bring and I’ll bring it.”

As Joyce approached the table both of her hands clutching coffee mugs, James offered the stunned Chloe a smirk before he wiped it from his face and accepted the coffee mug Joyce had extended out to him.

“Thank you…” he said as he sipped the drink before setting it down on the table. “For now, just bring your daughter and that smile of yours. This is our gift to you for your part in helping our daughter.”

As Joyce sat down, James once against folded his fingers together and directed his complete attention to Joyce.

“My daughter suffered a stress induced panic attack last night, Joyce,” James spoke his half-truth to Joyce. “It has been quite some time since one happened, but it happened last night; between the fire and Principal Wells’ meeting… I’m afraid she’s not in a healthy place emotionally anymore. This is a cylindrical cycle… but it has never been quite this bad before.”
Joyce winced at James’ observation. He had broken through any barrier of mistrust she held for him and connected to her parent to parent; and judging on her own relationship with Chloe in the wake of her husband’s demise, this seemed to have hit closer to home than he anticipated.

“Oh dear…” she murmured softly, to which James nodded. Shifting in his seat, he turned back to Chloe.

“After the Wells meeting, Rachel told me that you took the fall for her… all to keep her place in the play,” he asked the teenager. “May I ask why?”

James tilted his head to one side as he sipped his coffee and watched in renewed silence as Chloe struggled to find the right answer she could use without admitting she was head over heels for Rachel in front of both her mother and Rachel’s father.

Bowing her head, Chloe rubbed her neck.

It… didn’t seem… right… that she had to lose something she loved… because of a day away from school,” Chloe confirmed the truth to James. “I had to do something to… protect her from Wells.”

James arched his brow. He was probably more confused than before. What she was saying was going well beyond teenage short-sightedness. This was edging into martial sacrifice territory. How was that even possible in a child?

“You would protect her happiness, even at the expense your education?” he inquired, carefully keeping his inability to process this out of his tones and words.

Staring at James for a moment, Chloe shrugged.

“I wasn’t using it anyway.”

Judging from the expression of displeasure that tore out of the good nature Joyce was emitting, it seemed that wasn’t exactly the answer she wanted to hear. It was an amusingly deceptive answer.

“Well, I’m certain Rachel said… thank you last night…” James spoke slowly, deliberately, watching as Chloe squirmed in her seat as she tried not to just break down right there. “But I want to express it as well. Wells… overreaches at times, and in your case, he overreached. He clasped at whatever excuse he could find, and got rid of a – in his opinion – problem.”

James reached and briefly clasped his hand onto Chloe’s forearm. His never left hers. Perhaps it was a bit much, but people like Chloe… they rarely got this sort of attention people outside their immediate circle.

“But you’re not a problem Chloe Price; and I feel I should pay your kindness back,” James stated firmly, feeling the girl tremble from the reinforcement. “Come hell or high water I’m going to get you back into Blackwell Academy.”

Joyce’s eyes bulged out at James’ promise, her hand unconsciously snapping up to cover her mouth. She looked as though she was about to faint. Chloe glanced away from James and instead directed her attention to her mother, who looked moments away from weeping. She grabbed her mother’s shoulder. Joyce immediately pulled her hand away from her mouth to cover Chloe’s hand.
Chloe looked back to James. It was clear she was not entirely thrilled at the prospects of returning back to Blackwell.

“You would…” Joyce breathed. “…you world do that for us? For her?”

Finishing his coffee, James solemnly nodded for Joyce.

“Yes I would Joyce,’’ he returned. “Chloe deserves a proper education, I don’t think that anyone in this room, nor Rose and Rachel would want to have Chloe fall behind… and for the first time in a very long time, I feel like my Rachel has a friend… a genuine friend.”

Allow a small smile to cross onto his mouth, James turned back to Chloe.

“Chloe, you deserve… all the opportunities in the world open to you, and my wife and I would like to help you see to that,” James directed his words to the stunned teen. “I suspect the suspension will stand, but I’ll convince Wells reverse his decision. On Monday, I will pick you up bright and early and we’ll deal this problem out together, okay?”

Joyce pushed back her seat, dabbing her tear stained eyes briefly before forcing herself to emit a weak sounding chuckle. James followed her cue and held out his hand to her with a smile. Joyce bypassed it completely and pulled the District Attorney into a crushing hug, making James wince and freeze as he found himself looking at the slightly smirking Chloe.

Not entirely certain he was liking being in bed with the Price family, he ignored the worry and silently exhaling, James slowly wrapped his arms around the woman as well, giving her a professional pat on the back.

“Thank you for this opportunity, James,” Joyce muttered into his chest. “I don’t know what to say… Chloe would thank you as well, but she’s too inclined to like being expelled.”

It was James’ turn to chuckle. He pulled himself out of Joyce’s vice grip and rearranged his jacket.

“An understandable feeling for someone her age,” James said as he emitted as he looked Chloe’s way. “But education is important and this is the least I can do for her.”

Exhaling, James stepped back from Joyce.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to keep you any longer then I already have,” he finished. He paused and glanced again to Chloe and added. “Chloe, could you walk me to my car? There are a few things we should discuss, if that is fine with you?”

The second part was addressed to Joyce, but she was still numbed by what he had offered to do for her. Slowly the mother nodded and smiled. James returned it with one of his own and made his way to the hallway, pausing to allow Chloe to push by him and trudge towards the door.

“And Joyce?” James said as the door slammed behind him. “That was a damn fine cup of coffee.”

…
Leaned up against the side of the house, Chloe Price stood there in a state of stupefaction from the pile of shit that Rachel’s dad could summon in a few moments. As much as she did not like him, she had to give him some credit for it. If she thought she was the master of the bullshit, James Amber was next fucking level.

The door opened and out stepped Mr. Amber, he glanced at her, and with a smirk that chilled her from just much Rachel was in it, he gestured her to follow. He even moved like her, like there was a slink in his step, as though he was taking some sort of personal victory lap.

“You’re an… awesome actor, Mr. Amber…” she said, finally finding her voice as she trailed off after Rachel’s father. “I see where Rachel got it from.”

James emitted an appreciative chuckle.

“You are talking to a man who has had to spend fifteen years being minimum three steps ahead of a human snake,” he said casually as they both crossed the street to his car. “There are some things you cannot unlearn. And for obvious reasons, I’m going to assume you will want to give me a little leeway about this, being Rachel’s father and all…”

Chloe closed her eyes and exhaled. Yes, she supposed she did have reasons to want to stay on James’ good side. She still thought this was some sort of bullshit. It wasn’t like her and Rachel was together… sort of… if last night actually happened, then perhaps they were. She would need to get a definitive answer sooner rather than later.

Fuck, James was right; he did have reason to think he would have a little leeway to work with Chloe. Did the whole bullshit ‘interrogative dad’ act apply to girls interested in their daughters? She supposed she would have to ask Steph that question, if she was still speaking to after what happened to Mikey.

“Do you have a cigarette to spare?” James gruffly requested, his hand outstretched to her as though he already knew the fucking answer.

Chloe rolled her eyes and withdrew her pack of smokes and placed one in the palm of James’ hand. As he placed it between his lips, he tilted his head. Realizing he did not have a lighter, she reached once again into her pocket to grab hers and in silence she lit the man up. Somewhere in the back of her head she wondered if this was an act of dominance… forcing her to submit to his demands without complaining.

“Thank you,” James said as he took a drag. “Rose doesn’t like them, so that means I don’t like them by default…”

Slowly exhaling smoke out of his nose. James fell silent as he quietly examined the teenager.

“Last night was a mess,” he admitted to her. “Cards on the table, I had the notion – only for a short time – that I should make Sera disappear. Have the local dealers run her out of town and be done with her. A stupid thought… something some dipshit crime writer would only think of.”

Chloe was about to laugh at the thought of James doing something as drastic as that, but stopped herself as she noticed that there was no trace of dark humour in his words. She wasn’t the most socially apt person, but even she could notice this was a serious consideration made by a man who
put Rachel’s safety above everything else.

“For what it's worth to you, I want apologize for my behaviour… calling you a broken girl at dinner...” James pressed on. “I was scared and on the defensive… and I took it out on you for doing the right thing, by standing by a friend-”

“Ugh, Forget me you dumbass!” she snapped at him, cutting him off and completely forgoing any niceties she should have for Rachel's father. “You still fucking humiliated her by keeping all this Sera stuff from her! Rachel deserved so much better from you!”

Mr. Amber seemed genuinely surprised by the insult, or was it bemusement? She was a little too baked to tell right now. Whatever it was, at least he did not appear outraged. If anything he seemed to feel almost bad about it; but with the acting ability the man possessed, she wasn’t about to make a judgement call just yet.

“I did humiliate her… and I will have to live with that for the rest of my life…” he said lowly, tapping the tip of his cigarette. “But what I did… it is nothing compared what could unfold now if it is left unchecked.”

There was a note of honesty Chloe could hear in the way he spoke. It was something she remembered the most about her Father. The sincerity of concern for the child he loved, and in spite of all the lies and shit… there was still something fundamentally loving in which James regarded his child. He needed lessons in not being a total fucking asshole, but he wasn’t a Sean Prescott tiered motherfucker.

“I am not about to fuck up what I have with her for you,” she spoke to the father, her head bowed as she shook it. “It’s too new… fragile, I nearly fucked it up a few days ago. That’s not happening again.”

James leaned against the side of his car, inhaling his cigarette as he looked over Chloe as though he was examining her resole behind her statement.

“I understand, Chloe. She is your friend. A significant other if you'd have your way…” he murmured idly, watching her reaction carefully.

So, it was now out in the open. James and Chloe both knew exactly where each other stood. Both of them were fighting for the affections of the same girl, but coming from different sides. She had honestly expected James not to be okay with this. He carried himself as a man who could not have a lot of controversies in his life, and she imagined having a daughter who had a girlfriend would not exactly be great for his image.

Finding her spine, Chloe stepped forward and joined James, pressing her back against his car as well. She reached into her jacket and grabbed a cigarette for herself and silently the father and his daughter’s prospective girlfriend smoked in quiet. It was… nice. James didn’t try to dominate the conversation or force small talk like Step-Douche did. It was… kind of like standing there with an older male Rachel. Like he was there, but he was thinking about things several steps ahead.

“I… do not disapprove of you as much as I thought I would have when we first met, Chloe,” he said, breaking the silence with the same ease as the transition from night to day. “You’re far smarter than I thought to be honest with you. You understand the world better than she does. I… think you would be good for each other.”
Chloe rolled her eyes as she took a drag.

“Wow man,” she muttered, rubbing her neck. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

A smirk spread over James’ face. He seemed to see some humour in it.

“I know I’m on the top of everyone’s shit list right now, but I’m still her father, and I’m allowed to be leery when my only daughter brings home someone she likes,” he reminded her firmly, glancing her way for a moment. "Especially when she's... let's be honest... troubled. Fractured... but standing tall in spite of everything, which I admire..."

James rubbed the bridge of his nose, inhaling deeply.

“What I’m trying to say, is that I feel you’re mature enough to get a more definite response then what I gave you the other night,” James pressed on, his tone straining. “I want you to swear off any attempts at contacting Sera; and before you call me a ‘motherfucking asshole’, I want a chance to explain myself.”

Chloe narrowed her eyes at the motherfucking asshole. She’d hold off on calling him a motherfucking asshole for the time being.

Motherfucking asshole...

"Chloe, Sera… Sera is a poison to everything she touches…” he started again, an edge in his tone that testified how much he resented the woman he once loved. “In hindsight, her heroin addiction was only the last straw…”

The man rubbed his forehead as Chloe took in the clear anger the father felt for the woman who gave him Rachel.

“Rose and I have done everything within our power to set Rachel up for success,” James spoke finally as he dropped the last of his cigarette to the ground and stepped on it. “Rachel has inherited a trait from her that I cannot deal with on my own. She’s… whimsical…”

“She…” Chloe started to defend her, rubbing her neck. “She likes to live in the moment.”

“She’s whimsical and I suspect that you are very aware of how much danger that can be,” James snapped firmly back. “You know it loses its charm when you step back and objectively ponder the amount of shit she has probably put you through. She will try to convince you to set up a meeting with her… that is if she hasn’t done so already.”

Chloe remained silent. Everything James had said more or less struck her directly, but she was never going to admit it how much he may have been right. She was on the verge of calling Frank about Sera when Mom called her down.

“I told you I’m never going to lie to her for you,” she mutinously muttered.

James nodded.

“I want the opposite. I want you to be her truth, her moral compass, her guardian angel, whatever it takes,” James replied immediately. “My daughter is not speaking to me now, and I want you to convince her it’s in everyone’s best interest I get to.”
"Why in the fuck."

"Because I’m going to give her everything what she wants… like I always do," James cut her off gruffly. “I’m going to give her the meeting she desires, I’ll even let you two run off for the summer. But before anything happens, it has to be done with all four of us - Rose, Rachel, you and I - agreeing to it; and I need to be working in closer proximity with you. The only way we can keep her safe is if we work directly together to see that goal through."

The teen and the parent stared at each other as James’ words lingered between the two of them. She really could not believe just how much the man seemed to have known, and that now after a sleepless evening, he was now ready to agree to Rachel’s demands with conditions. By far the most curious was just how…adult, she was being treated by him. There was no patronizing, or quiet submission like last night. He had a genuine interest in working with her.

In the deepest depths of her heart, she wanted to take the deal. It just made so much more sense than snooping around, fucking with Frank and his boss/pal Damon… and what was this about him being fucking cool with them escaping Arcadia Bay for a time?

“She’ll hate me for this,” she murmured to herself. She felt a little sick by all of this. All of this deception James Amber played in.

“No,” he said as he shook his head. “She’ll hate me when she realizes I used my authority and your possession of illegal substances over you to get this meeting.

Without bothering to ask permission, James reached into the pocket Chloe had stashed her pack of cigarettes in, and pulled out the small dime bag of weed she bought from Frank the other day. She stood there, face frozen in fear as she became acutely aware that she was standing with the Arcadia Bay District Attorney.

James Amber stood there, the baggie still outstretched in front of the two of them. He looked at her with almost bored expression, like for him kids with pot was not something new. Chloe supposed that was true, but she was not about to admit that she was a fuckin’ cliché.

“You can relax… I’m not going to bust you over a dime bag…” James said as he handed the baggie back to Chloe, who snatched it and immediately pocketed in case her mom was watching. “Now you have something else to throw against me for her to hate me. So are we in this together?”

Chloe watched in silence as Rachel’s father pushed himself off the side of car and took a step in front of her. Silently he extended his hand out to her. Looking at it for a moment longer and silently hating herself for it, Chloe extended her own out and took his hand.

“For Rachel… I’ll work with you…” she murmured, dropping his hand after a single shake. “But if this goes sideways, I’m going to find Sera myself and we’ll deal with this our way.”

James emitted a small laugh. It wasn’t obviously fake; in fact he seemed genuinely amused by this.

"Your loyalty to her is admirable. Rachel would be a fool not to see the extent of how you feel about her…” James said, clasping his hand Chloe’s shoulder. “So take my advice on one thing: Make it clear to her. I’ll be in contact, Chloe… and you can get off my car now, thank you very much.”
Gesturing to his vehicle Chloe was still resting against, James remained silent and still as Chloe pushed herself off as he had. She watched as James climbed into the vehicle and closed the door behind him with a loud thud. As the engine ignited, James rolled down the window.

“Blue hair… cool move; she’s going to eat that up…” he observed gaily. “And just so you know if you hurt my little girl, that’s basically game over for you.”

With that final strike against her, as well as a final wave in her direction; James pulled his car off the curb and drove off, leaving Chloe speechless. She stood there silently watching the Amber car drive off down the road as an alphabetical list of terms she wanted to use against James Amber ran through her head.

Realizing she was far too late for any of that, she sighed and took a drag of her cigarette. As she did her free hand reached into her jeans and pulled out her phone. It was time to get Rachel involved. As much as she wanted to see her face again, she wasn’t exactly looking forward to the conversation where she told Rachel her Dad cornered her.

Then again, maybe she did… James had set up a situation where the only one who was at fault was him…

You - Rachel, you there? Chloe typed into her phone.

It only took eight seconds to get the response. Chloe counted each one of them.

Rachel – Just thinking of you.

Her chest tightened up at the simple statement. There was no fucking way digital letters should have been able to do that to another human being. Chloe took one last drag of her cigarette before dropping it, her eyes never leaving the screen.

You - We got to meet something came up

Rachel - Sounds ominous.

You - Depends on how you react to it. It involves your mom

You - Birth Mom

You - Fuck this is so weird

Rachel - Hella fucking weird. I’ll meet you at the junkyard asap.

Chloe was about to pocket her phone and walk back to the garage when the phone buzzed again.

Rachel - Chloe.

Rachel - I’m so happy we’re in this together.

Rachel - As much as I want to meet her, you mean more to me than anyone else.

Rachel - And if you were to ask me to get something to eat, take in a movie or even watching paint
Chloe stared silently at the screen, her mouth slightly agape. This was really happening. Shit… she had to be her coolest now. She had to have the most perfect, most suave response she could give to Rachel. It had to be cool and flirtatious, but not creep level.

**You -** Paint drying sounds good.

Chloe mentally screamed.

_Fuck._

**Rachel -** That’s my Chloe. Fuck yes to that. You bring the booze, I’ll bring the paint.

**Rachel -** And just so you know.

**Rachel -** My birth mom isn’t the only thing I want to discuss with you.

**Rachel -** So come quickly.

**Rachel -** Totally don’t take that as innuendo.

**Rachel -** But that could totally be my job one day.

**Rachel -** See you soon XX

Lost in her thoughts, Chloe pocketed her phone finding that she was completely unable to get rid of the stupid silly grin that overwhelmed her senses. It wasn’t the innuendo that put her in this state of giddiness (although that was fucking cool), or even the promise that they would sit down and discuss what they had together was. It was two simple words that left her breathless.

_My Chloe._

That… that had a hella nice ring to it…
"Stupid fucking carburetor!" Chloe Price, amateur engine mechanic and professional shit disturber shrieked. "One day I'll figure out to go back in time and strangle the motherfucker who made the internal combustion engine!"

"But then how else are we going to poison the earth?"

Chloe bounced her head off the hood of the truck and yelped out a string of 'fucks' and 'cunts' in her standard elegant prose. She pulled her head out of the engine block and found Rachel standing there, a small smile resting easy on her tired face. Between the events of last night involving Sera and the events of last night involving… well, the two of them, she hadn't take much time to catch up on her lack of sleep.

In spite of her exhaustion, Rachel looked good. She was dressed in a dark, heavy jacket, ripped jeans and a band tee. She looked like she was ready to kick some asses; namely anyone who stood in the way of her meeting Sera.

Chloe did her best not to think that it was going to be her who held her back from the reunion which Rachel was so desperate to have.

"Well…" she returned as she watched Rachel step forward towards her with her arms still crossed. "Without car exhaust we could always double down on CFC based aerosol spraying. Eat the Ozone layer away and torch this fucking planet to a cinder."

Chloe watched stunned as Rachel emitted a giggle at her stupid attempt at being charming. Deep in the back of her mind constantly nagged at her if any of this was real, if Rachel really thought she was funny… if the girl even liked her at all. Even with all those texts, and the fact that her mouth was still sore after last night's back to back make out sessions. How could she know it was real for certain?

It meant that she had to trust, and as much as she trusted Rachel, she still could not help but feel like she just had to hold back… just in case she was disappointed as usual. She wouldn't let herself be hurt.

Not again…

"Edgy…" she almost purred to the tall girl. "But I guess I should expect nothing less from a blue haired punk girl… holy shit, Price… that looks so good on you..."

As Rachel ran her slender fingers through Chloe's blue fringe, she wanted to relish in this attention for as long as she could. She wanted to slam shut the truck hood and plant Rachel on top of her and just kiss her… ruin her…

But she couldn't. Not when she was weighed down with her alliance to the one person Rachel seemed to hate the most at the moment.

So as she pulled back out of Rachel's reach, Chloe spilled everything to her. That her father had
come to her home and cornered her, that he more or less entrapped her by using her mother's desperation for her daughter's future as a means to further his own agenda, that he wanted her to help control Rachel's reunion with Sera. Everything of importance James Amber had told her, Chloe relayed to the increasingly horrified Rachel.

By the end of it, Rachel couldn't even look her in the eye. She had turned away.

"So… Your dad pretty much covered all his bases, he came to my house and made my mom promises that he would get me back into Blackwell," she finished softly. "The one thing that would get her and step-douche off my back, and he just fucking zeroed in on it like a cruise missile or some shit. So I'm telling you this because what other choice do I have?"

Rachel remained silent, her armed folded in front of her. There was a lurch in the pit of Chloe's stomach that filled her with fear. Fear that Rachel was fitting the pieces together and was drawing a conclusion that her Father and Chloe were closer together then what was actually going on.

She was right; Rachel was going to hate her for this.

Chloe pushed herself off the grill of the truck and step forward, her hear racing as she ignored the sick feeling bubbling barely controlled under the surface. She stepped out in front of Rachel and took in the anger the shorter blond wore on her expression, her eyes focused on her feet. It didn't take long before Rachel realized she wasn't alone, and looked up, her hazel eyes staring intensely up into the taller girl blue.

A wave of discomfort washed over Chloe. She took a step back and adverted her eyes away… like she didn't deserve to look at her.

"I'm sorry that it seems like I'm siding with him," Chloe murmured to the silently observing Rachel. "He's a liar and nothing he does is going to change that, but I think he's trying to do the right thing… in his own sleazy way… and I know that's not something you want to hear right now given everything, but I think he genuinely gives a fuc…"

Chloe trailed her ramblings off as she felt Rachel reach up and pressed her palm onto the side of her cheek. Chloe felt her legs unconsciously buckle and so silently, she willed herself to remain upright.

"Look at me please…" Rachel whispered to her.

Like Ariel commanded by Prosperia, Chloe looked up and found Rachel was smiling gently… reassuringly… just for her.

She never wanted to be out of this position.

"I don't blame you, Chloe… I could never blame you," Rachel reassured her, her tone not permitting this to be up to any sort of debate.

Exhaling, Rachel reached out and took both of Chloe's hands.

"This is my Dad's machinations. He's made you as much a victim as he has to me," she continued, her voice hardening. "He's used his promise of Blackwell readmission to sway your mom. What a total, fucking bastard…"

Falling silent, Rachel walked the two of them back to the truck. Rachel sat down, pulling Chloe down with her, her hand never letting go. Together both girls sat in the silence as Rachel appeared to be back deep in her own thoughts. Slowly, her frustration was bubbling back up to the surface.
Feeling lame as all fuck, all Chloe could think of doing was to stroke the top of Rachel's hand as she had done to her only as few days ago on the train. What she really wanted to do was start last night up in earnest again and be enveloped by the fire of Rachel Amber, but it just wasn't the right time for that.

No matter how much she wanted to tongue wrestle her right about now.

"I don't know what we should do," Rachel spoke, her voice small, and for the first time, extremely uncertain. Looking up to meet Chloe's gaze, she added. "Chloe what do you think we should do? You said you knew people who know Sera. Wouldn't that be easier than dealing with… him?"

**Whimsical... impulsive...** as much as she hated to admit it, Chloe knew James was right about Rachel. She was dangerously naïve if she thought somehow dealing with the likes of Frank and by extension Damon Merrick was preferable to sitting down and having another uncomfortable conversation with her father.

It was clear now why James was so… okay with her. She was in a position to check Rachel's darker impulses. If it meant working with the damaged girl to keep her from doing crazy shit, then James was willing to make that leap out of a comfort zone.

With Rachel watching her with a devotion she never had directed to her before, Chloe chose her next words carefully.

"If I'm being… honest, I think that after yesterday… what happened to Mikey while I was working with Frank… I don't think I want to get involved in that shit ever again," she admitted to Rachel, lowering her eyes to look at her lap. "Buying pot off Frank's one thing, but working for Frank means working for Damon Merrick, and I don't ever want to work with that total prick ever again if I have to. If we talk to Frank, Damon could start pulling shit, and put us back into that situation… or worse."

Chloe felt Rachel's hands grip hers tighter. Rachel bent down and forced Chloe's line of sight to focus on her again.

"Chloe… And I don't ever want to see you hurt for my benefit," she reassured Chloe gently. "You've done so much for me. If you think it's safer to talk to my Dad, I'll be with you…"

She paused and allowed a small smirk to cross on her face.

"You'll have to do all the talking, though" she tacked on. "I don't think I'll have much to say to him."

Chloe arched her eyebrow.

"I'm your *Spokeswoman*?" Chloe said lightly. It earned her the smallest of shoves as Rachel stood up tall - for the time being – above the sitting Blackwell dropout.

"I trust you to speak for me… only you," Rachel airily retorted as she extended her hand out to help lift Chloe out of the dirt.

Chloe took her hand, and Rachel gave a heavy yank, pulling Chloe right up until she collided into the smaller girl. The two of them laughed it off, but neither of them dared to move. Chloe bit her lip as Rachel looked up to her still amused. She did her utmost not to draw attention to the fact that Rachel's hands pulled away and wrapped around her back, but only for a moment.

They slid lower and lower until each of her hands slipped into Chloe's back pockets. Chloe emitted
a sharp inhale. Rachel remained silent. She continued to stare up at the taller girl unblinking, coyly. There were thoughts shared between the two of them that were going unaddressed…

"So…" Rachel spoke, breaking through the thick sexual tension she caused. "I decided coming over here that I didn't want to come home tonight. I know I'm being presumptuous and all, but since you got to spend the night at my place… maybe I could spend the night at yours."

Her mind locked up in stupid mode, all Chloe could do was blink and try to be smooth for Rachel.

"I… don't know," she said, causally stringing Rachel along. "Are you going to be handsy like late night… or now…?"

Standing on the tips of her toes, Rachel surprised Chloe with a kiss on the edge of her lips.

"A little bit," Rachel returned as she pulled back, her hands sliding out of Chloe's pockets and rested again on each side of her hips. "Mostly I'm a little clingy tonight. I got… all this shit going on and only one person in my life who understands me, and as fast as… this…might seem… it just feels… right… right?"

Pursing her lips together, Chloe nodded to her, her hand flying in the direction of the truck.

"Alright then… but first, come on over here and help me," Chloe spoke to her as she made her way back to the truck. "I want to see the Princess of Blackwell grimy and sweaty… and not only because of me…"

A protesting cry came from behind her.

"Me?" she protested, her hand flying to her chest as she looked at Chloe like she was losing it. Like she thought that she had no business getting her hands dirty. Chloe nodded firmly. No amount of puppy dog eyes was about to dissuade her now.

"Fuck yeah you, drama queen. You're going to help me," Chloe playfully snapped back at her. "If we're going to escape the Bay, I shouldn't be the only one putting in all the work… right?"

If Rachel was about to argue, she caught herself and clamped her mouth shut. If they were going to get the fuck out of here one day, then they both had to put some fucking work in.

...

...

If Rachel was being honest with herself, she was still locked in a daze from the events of last night.

Working on the truck was a welcomed distraction, and she got to learn something new. Chloe, it seemed was far brighter than she was ever willing to let on, and a better teacher as well. Chloe didn't lose her shit a single time when she screwed up. Instead she patiently explained all that she knew to her and helped when she was asked for help. It took until sunset before the truck was in good enough condition to get it limping to the Price residence.

She was asked to wait outside for a moment or two by Chloe. Apparently she wanted to make sure it was okay with her mother that she could spend the night, and Step-Douche wasn't going to cause any problems for either of them. She pretended not to notice anything, but she knew it was probably involving the visit her dad had with Joyce and Chloe. So when she was invited in, Rachel put on the act to keep Joyce at ease. Joyce looked at Rachel as though she was a moment away
from exploding thanks to Dad saying she was emotionally damaged.

She had to hand it to Chloe. When she spilled her guts, she didn't leave anything off the table. At least, that was what she had come to expect from a paragon of honesty like her.

Dinner was a thankfully quiet and humble affair. Chloe's mother's boyfriend was there. David, she recalled his name being. He attempted to break through Chloe's wall of silence by talking about the truck Chloe and she had brought to the Price home. Beyond single syllable answers, he did not get much.

In some ways Rachel felt a little bad for him. He was intruding into regions Chloe had reserved for her father, and her father alone. David would be locked in an uphill battle for a very long time if he continued on like this.

Chloe herself was also quiet also. She seemed almost… embarrassed by everything, like she wanted to present something better for Rachel. Between the peas, mashed potatoes and leftover roast, she just seemed like it was something to be ashamed of. She would not look her in the eye and ate in grudging silence and seemed to want dinner to finish as fast as possible.

So Rachel did her a favour, she finished quick as she could, thanked Joyce and before long, she had been dragged out of the living room/dining room and up the stairs. Rachel was an observer, and so she could not help but notice the transition from public to private. As they started to climb, the grip around Rachel's wrist weakened and slid down until fingers entwined.

"Welcome to Casa de Shithole," Chloe announced as she led her guest into her bedroom, her hands spreading dramatically as she looked back to Rachel like she should have been amused by the self-loathing.

She wasn't.

Rolling her eyes, Rachel stepped forward underneath Chloe's outstretched arms; one of her hands reached out and dared press against Chloe's side, her fingers tracing the sides of her bra through her shirt. Her hand glided low on her finger gripped the waist of her jeans.

"Simmer down, Edge Queen…" Rachel retorted, curling her words as she felt Chloe shiver from her touch. "Self-deprecation will only get you so far into my heart. Your confidence is so much hotter…"

Listening to Chloe emit a soft exhale as she let go of Chloe's taut body, Rachel chalked up a victory in her books and stepped by her. Silently as she wandered into the whirlwind of Chloe's life and took it all in carefully.

Throughout the mess and chaos, she could begin to see a pattern. Everything Chloe didn't give a shit about was tossed around with no care or concern. Everything that ever mattered to her was almost enshrined and meticulously well kept. So far the only thing that mattered was pictures. The memories of the past were the cornerstones of Chloe Price's reason for continuing.

As had been the case at dinner, Chloe stood there nervously at the door, watching breathlessly as Rachel inspected her room. It seemed to her that Chloe had tapped into some sort of mindset that she was just going to up and flee when Rachel realized they weren't in the some socio-economic class, that she might have been slumming it with the older girl.

Chloe was brave and proud, but mixing shame into it would be a dangerously volatile. The only way for this to go well was to ease her concerns and address them patiently as they came up from
here on no. Chloe was long term investment she was ready to make.

Long term investment… That’s something he would say.

God, she fucking hated how much she sounded like her dad. She hated to think just how much of him rubbed off on her. All the pieces were falling into place now. After learning about Sera and the extent of his deceptions it all made sense why she was such a chameleon, why she could blend in perfectly with everyone but never felt she had much of a life of her own.

Well that stopped here and now, and Chloe would help her be who she wanted to be.

Strong.

"Is everything all right?" Chloe spoke, her voice shaking slightly as she seemed to have been waiting for Rachel to say something awful. "I guess this room could use a vacuuming… or a pressure washer."

A small spread over Rachel's face as she stopped in front of Chloe's desk. She found herself staring at a photo of a young, happy Chloe standing there with a tall, handsome strawberry blonde haired man. In her hands she held some sort of science fair award.

She told the truth, she loved science at one point of her life. She wasn't sure why it touched her but it did. Two Truths and a Lie translated to Three Truths for Chloe during their railway escapees. She had expected her to play along, but she had survived her in the best way possible.

It was in that moment that she knew that she would implicitly trust this girl with everything…

"No, Chloe. It's perfect. This room is you… and I kinda envy it," she admitted to Chloe. "You have no idea how much I envy free expression… and you… you get to be just who you want to be."

Delicately, Rachel reached out and took the photo off the counter. She glanced at Chloe and noticed she was taking small step forwards to join Rachel in front of the window. She seemed almost worried that Rachel had pulled the picture out of its place.

"This is your father, right?" she asked the approaching taller girl. It was such a stupid question, but sometimes stupid questions were the quickest ways to spark the conversation.

Chloe reached out, her finger touching the frame Rachel held. Melancholy painted over her expression as she looked on her father with a reverence that physically hurt Rachel's heart to observe.

"Yeah… that's my dad," she breathed as held her eyes on her father's image as though there were a chance the image might come to life. "Fuck… I wish you could have met in person rather than a picture. He was coolest fucking guy ever. Christ, he made country music seem cool."

Rachel didn't doubt that observation for a moment. Rachel wished she could have met him as well. She wished she could thank him for his role in making Chloe who she was.

"You have his eyes…" she whispered to Chloe, glancing up to her. "…and not just the colour, you have the same warmth…"

Chloe tore her eyes away from her father to look at Rachel as though Rachel had had said. She seemed to be searching for some sort of hesitation or falseness for which she could latch onto; but she had meant it, and so Chloe was apparently left even more confused.
"Warmth?" she repeated, searching Rachel's expression still.

Rachel pressed the photo back into Chloe's hands. She reached up, her fingers cupping Chloe's cheek until they reached the yellow and purple tingeing of the bruise around her eye socket. Chloe winced, but only for a moment.

"You can be a cynical badass bitch all you like to your Mom, David and the rest of the world, Chloe Price, but you can't hide the warmth from me," she faintly spoke to her. "I won't let you hide it."

Pulling her hand away slowly, Rachel kicked off her shoes (in spite of the state of the bedroom, she wasn't a complete animal) and stepped onto Chloe's bed. She dropped down onto her ass, very much aware of Chloe staring at her a little dumbfounded.

Apparently Rachel Amber, Queen of Blackwell, spread out on her bed was still sort of a shock. If it hadn't been for the Sera revelation, she supposed she too would have been in more of a shy state if she found Chloe Fucking Price spooning her in her bed.

Rachel rolled to one side and found another photo of Chloe and her father. This time however they were outdoors having the time of their lives, and with them was another girl. A little smaller than Chloe, a brunette cutie with freckles and the largest, goofiest grin on her face she had ever seen.

Rachel turned back to Chloe and found she had put the photo of her father and her back right in its original spot. That reverence which she had hypothesized earlier. Everything else could burn, but those she loved were held with the purest of reverences.

Deep down, she hoped she would get that treatment one day as well.

Raising her index finger, Rachel smirked and silently gestured Chloe to join her. She watched as Chloe winged her hands for a moment before she finally stepped forward, pausing only for a moment to kick off her shoes. Silently she joined Rachel open the bed. As she did so, Rachel leaned back and touched the photo as she had done before.

"... and this... this must be Max, am I correct?" Rachel inquired, touching the brunette carefully. "She was your world once."

Chloe remained facing away from Rachel, away from the picture. She instead chose to stay locked into state of silence. It was obvious to her that she touched a nerve in the usually tough punk girl. For now she would not push the envelope any further; but she did have more to say on the subject. She did not know why, but she just felt... compelled.

Silently, Rachel pulled herself up and wrapped her arms around Chloe. As Chloe stiffened, she gently shushed the girl until she finally relaxed a little. Rachel rested her chin on Chloe's shoulder, her cheek nuzzling Price's.

"With everything you've done for me, maybe this could be my thing... my way to help you..." Rachel murmured into Chloe's shoulder. "Whether it's a reunion... rekindling a friendship or even helping you close the book on this period. I know it clearly still bothers you, and you deserve to have some sort of affirmation where you two stand, or... or at the very least closure."

Pulling back to plant a kiss on Chloe's cheek, she reluctantly untangled her arms around Chloe and took a dramatic sweep of the room. She paused and could not help but giggle.

Of fucking course Chloe Price had a Pirate hat. How fucking rad was that!!
Rachel scooted over the bed and stood up just long enough to scoop the pirate hat off the full length Mirror and planted it on her head. She turned back to Chloe, truly smiling for the first time in what felt like forever. Rachel found Chloe appeared to be amused as well by this.

"The Captain's Hat is for the Captain's only, newbie," Chloe still managed to snap out sarcastically.

Rachel smirked again and climbed back onto the bed, she collapsed next to Chloe and bumped into her accidentally… well, totally on purpose.

"Then I suppose this is a mutiny, then. Comes with the whole Captain/First Mate dynamic," she sighed dramatically. "... buuut I suppose you wouldn't have known that… something about this Max girl tells me she never mutinied against you before."

Chloe issued a small shrug.

"Max was best First Mate a Pirate Captain could ask for, then," Chloe murmured back to her. "She mutinied at the right moment."

Rachel winced as she pulled off the pirate hat and handed it to Chloe. She knew the second she spoke she had said the worst possible thing to her. She watched as Chloe moodily examined the cap before she tossed it out into the sea of clothing and mess.

She didn't mean to fray the fragile connections she had to this Max girl… not until the issue was solved once and for all.

Biting her lip, Rachel bowed her head and remained silent. Together both girls sat there on the edge of the bed, apparently waiting for the other to find the nerve to speak about something, anything, before the inevitable conversation came up.

It was not that she did not want to have this conversation. She had spent months ready to just be Chloe's friends. She did not think that in the two… almost three days that they knew each other, they would be locked into a course leading to them becoming… them. This was completely uncharted territory, and not just for her. Chloe too seemed almost scared by this.

Fuck, she scared about it.

She had never trusted anyone before beyond a few vapid things. School appointments, hanging out, simple things that would not intercede into her personal life and cause her any amount of pain. She always had to be on the offensive and never placed on the defensive. She had always wondered where this distance had come, and now that the whole Sera thing was out, she knew finally where she had inherited her mistrust from.

Now here she was, three days into a new friendship and all she wanted was to be open for this virtual strange. Vulnerable, vulnerable as Chloe was willing to be within hours of knowing each other. Sure, standing up to assholes was brave, but it was this that really left her breathless and in awe of Chloe Price.

… If she could even be as half like Chloe, she would never be afraid of anything again…

A small smile crossed back onto her lips as she felt Chloe tentatively reach out and slide her arm around her waist. Glancing at each other for a moment, Rachel pushed herself a little closer to Chloe. She reached out and gripped the top of Chloe's free hand, intertwining her fingers into Chloe's.

She would have to be bold, and brave. Chloe deserved nothing less than that.
"It's a little soon to be girlfriends… even if that's something I want…” Rachel gently breathed to Chloe. Her pulse raced out of fear her words would be misconstrued as rejection or delayed rejection. She was not just kicking the issue down the field. She did want this…

Rachel watched as Chloe rolled her eyes and squeezed her grip on Rachel a little tighter.

"Please, I like you, but I'm not that desperate jump right in," she retorted, her tone lighting up somewhat brighter in the aftermath of the Max mutiny fiasco. "We've known each other for three days."

Rachel faked a stink-eye.

"What?" Rachel sighed in a faux breathless tone. "You don't wanna mash the clams?"

Rachel did her best not to laugh as she watched Chloe turn fucking red right in front of her eyes. She appeared to be struggling at maintaining her cool as well.

"What? Gag on your Vag?" she managed to get out through her urge to giggle.

The two girls collapsed onto each other as they exploded into a fit of laughter.

"Oh my god," Rachel somehow got out as she flattened herself on the bed next to the giggling Chloe. "You are literally the most disgusting girl I've ever met… and I fucking love it."

As their laughter died, this time Chloe and Rachel were fortunate enough to find themselves in a much more comfortable silence before. The two of them laid their together, bathing in the setting sun pouring through the window. Rachel found her smile unable to leave her face as she laid there with Chloe in a state of total bliss.

This… this was something that she wanted…

Next to her she felt Chloe move. Like she was going to get back up; Rachel wrapped an arm around her possessively. Chloe stopped moving, and instead shuffled her arm out and nestled it behind her head as a rest. Rachel relaxed even further, turning slightly so that she would have the opportunity to stare at the ceiling. She was smiling, but it was only surface level. She seemed deep in her own thoughts.

Chloe was going to say something, and spare Rachel from having to be the one to take the dive.

That was all it took to motivate her.

"There's no rush… but it's something I do want to have with you," Rachel started uncertainly, a strange shyness washing over her. "The connection we have… I have never felt this way for anyone else before; and I don't delude myself to think it will be perfect, because right now, it would be so easy to do that. We'll have our issues to sort through… but I just think we need a strong foundation to build… us… before we dive into this for real…"

Rachel trailed off for a moment and looked over Chloe to make sure she was following. The older, taller girl was now propped up onto her arms, looking down on the blond girl with a hunger in her eye that made Rachel quiver, her knees squeezing together as she suppressed the urge to moan.

"Do you... do you get where I'm coming from?" she said weakly, her eyes hooded as she took in Chloe's head tilt to one side. "Am I making any sort of sense?"

A small smile crossed onto Chloe's mouth as she gave Rachel an equally smile nod.
"Perfect sense…" Chloe murmured.

Rachel bit her lip as she found herself staring at Chloe's cracked lips as Chloe pushed herself off her elbows and sat up properly. They were almost as bruised as her eye. There was no lipstick or Chap Stick or balm. They were lusciously natural, and that was Chloe in a microcosm… unvarnished, imperfect, yet perfect to her.

"… But to make things crystal clear, I don't want to just be your friend, either," Rachel continued as Chloe leaned in. "Not after last night... not after the things you can do with that tongue of yours-"

Chloe's lips touched hers and gently she worked her mouth open. The anticipation had nearly driven her nuts, stretching seconds into minutes. Rachel laid there, open, vulnerable to the desires of Chloe Price. If Chloe had said one word, she would have given herself to her willingly, eagerly.

But Chloe was not like that. The words were spoken, and Rachel knew that Chloe was too noble, too sweet to break the promises so soon. There would be plenty of time for that anyway, all the time in the world…

"That said there is something I want to give you something, Chloe Price..." she breathed into Chloe's mouth.

Kissing her once more, Chloe pulled back from Rachel's face, but only enough to give her space to move. Rachel pulled herself up and quietly sat there with Chloe. Unable to tear her eyes away from Chloe's soft eyes, she gently pulled her Bracelet off. The one she had since she was a child. The one her birth mother had given her.

The two girls stared at it for a moment before Rachel took Chloe's arm and gently she slid the bracelet around Chloe's wrist. She felt… naked, not having it, but looking at Chloe and seeing sheer… reverence and awareness of what this meant, made it all worth it.

"This is my promise to you," she breathed to the taller girl. "You have stood with me in spite of all… all of this shit… and you need to know no matter what Chloe Price, I'll stand with you."

Chloe did have words to speak. Considering this was Chloe Price, and that alone was startling. All she could do was sit there and look at the bracelet around her wrist. She looked at it as though it was an improvised engagement ring. Perhaps it was in some high school way.

Now all they needed to do as make it Facebook official and they were officially teenaged brides...

As light as she wanted to be about this it was the expression Chloe wore that made all of this far more meaningful. Chloe was clearly a girl who spent the past few years locked up inside herself, hidden away and isolated behind barriers so that she never had to risk anything to anyone ever again. Now here sat someone who held not only the keys to her heart, but to her very destruction.

Gently she pressed her hand to Chloe's cheek, bringing Chloe's attention back to her. There, laid bare, she could take in the shimmering of tears coating Chloe's eyes. Tears which Chloe's willpower alone refused to allow fall in front of the younger girl.

Smiling reassuringly, Rachel leaned forward, her mouth gently touching Chloe's again. As Chloe would protect, her, Rachel knew she too would protect Chloe just as fiercely.

Pulling her lips back reluctantly, Chloe exhaled, emitting a small laugh in order to break the tension. Her fingers grazed the bracelet for a moment before she pulled herself out of Rachel's arms and stood back up. She turned her back to Rachel so that she could pretend to have some sort of
privacy to wipe her eyes.

Rachel reached into her jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and her lighter. She lit one up and threw the pack and lighter in Rachel's direction casually as she bent over to search for something. Taking the pack, Rachel removed one and followed Chloe's lead, leaning over the bed to grab the ash tray she noticed.

Well, when in Rome after all…

"So, are you still in a clingy mode?" Chloe asked brightly, trying to re-establish a jovial tone in her voice, her cigarette dangling from her lips as she searched through a pile of junk.

Rachel lit up her first cigarette ever and took a small inhale. It burned like fuck.

"I might be," she said, attempting to not show off the fact she had virgin lungs. "You got something on your mind, Pricey?"

Rachel inwardly winced. Not a very smooth pet name. She would have to work on it. Right now she was just grateful Chloe hadn't noticed.

Chloe did not answer her directly but emitted a string of profanity and then a final triumphant 'ahhh fuck yeah Steph'. She pulled out a disc and as she pulled off her jacket, she waved a dime bag in front of her with a grin.

As Chloe brought out an old TV and DVD player from the closet and set on the edge of the bed, Rachel mentally scheduled Chloe and her a visit to Mikey North, and by extension his brother Drew and Steph Gringrich. His condition was partly cause by their impulsive decision to skip town with little to no preparation. Being an emotional mess seemed to lead the two of them to ruin. She would have to check herself in the near future.

The DVD now in the machine, Chloe dived onto the bed, dived onto Rachel in fact. As they collided, Rachel brought her hands down and the two of them shared a tobacco flavoured, long kiss. As Rachel released her control, Chloe took command and kissed her again. It left her flustered by the growing confidence in Chloe's actions. She was starting to get over the nervous guilt which held her back. It was… interesting…

"I was thinking of smoking the last of this, and watching Blade Runner. You game Amber?" Chloe asked as she twisted her body off Rachel and kicked the play button before spreading out next to her.

"Only if I get to be your Rachael and you be my Deckard, Price," she bartered casually.

Chloe seemed to ponder it carefully.

"I'll be Deckard, but I don't know about you being Rachael…" Chloe said as she turned to look up at Rachel sitting over her. "Priss does try to crush Deckard's head between her thighs. I think I might rather want you to be her."

Rachel rolled her eyes.

"A lewd, but reasonably logical position to take," she coyly admitted, stroking Chloe's arm. "But appearances can be deceiving, and maybe you just haven't gotten to see what Rachael can actually do with Deckard in the film… a Rachael might even be more fun than a Priss."

Leaving Chloe intrigued by a thought she clearly never pondered before, Rachel settled into
Chloe's shoulder and as she watched Chloe light up their joint. This was nice, this clam before the storm that would about to crash onto them tomorrow. For now neither of them had to think about her father, Sera, Blackwell or anything else. Tonight was just for them.

This would hopefully be the first of many nights like this…

As she settled in, Rachel decided there and then that Max and Chloe could keep their pirate games. She would be far more content playing Blade Runner with Chloe…

Chapter End Notes

I got a quite unexpectedly positive response to the last chapter, and it played a large role in the speed in which this chapter came out. Participate, help me stay focused and I promise you, you'll enjoy what I have in store for you.

Hope I did an okay job with Rachel. Between her and Victoria, they are the two characters I'm writing as carefully as I can.

Next Chapter: Rachel decides it's only fair she gets to try out Chloe's clothing and Chloe attempts to maintain the peace.
At 7:30 in the morning a hail of guitars and drums woke Rachel from her sleep to find that she was blindered by a tussle of blonde hair and her arm numbed by the girl she was currently spooning.

Between the weed and cigarettes they had smoked, Rachel had been left cotton mouthed and clouded with thoughts. A perfect sort of numbness that made her only vaguely aware that today was Monday, and that it was time to go to school, and that her father was coming to pick Chloe and her up for a meeting with Wells, the first encounter she would have with her father since Saturday.

So this is continuous happiness…
...You know, I always imagined it something more….
With the right drapes, the right paints, the right frames, this could really work…
...What a great day to spend indoors…

She didn't want to do any of this. This quiet moment was too good to just up and end. But the world was calling for Chloe and her to join it once again. Exhaling, she closed her eyes again and breathed in the smoky scent of the girl she clung to. A few more minutes couldn't hurt the two of them.

This was some sort of strange new world she inhabited in. A week ago, if she thought she would be here, lying in Chloe Price's bed after a smoke session… Sera… if she was being honest, she wasn't entirely sure she was ready to face this reality she now had to navigate through. She had so much she had to rethink. From her relationship to her father, to how in the hell she was going to look at the woman she called Mom for as long as she knew in the eye and figure out where they stood, to Sera Gearhardt.

IN A HAIL OF SPARKS
AND A TANGLE OF WIRES
EVERYTHING WENT WRONG

A small part of her heart still wished she and Chloe were doing this on their own, without the interference of her Dad. The thought of having to be dependent on the promises of a liar made her sick to the stomach. Chloe had contacts, but after the initial shock, was no longer willing to use them. As understandable as it was that Chloe hated the idea of working close to this Frank and Damon ever again, it was still a little… disappointing…

Rachel silently checked herself. She was asking others to put themselves in danger for her own desires. In spite of her own troubles, it just wouldn't be fair to put Chloe in that sort of position as she already had done inadvertently. They had made their promises the other night. They would have each other's backs from here on out. Her enemies were Chloe's and vice versa.

Soon the world wouldn't be ready for the two of them on the loose and on even footing.

So where has all the day gone?
And why are my lungs aching when I breathe?
Is there something wrong with the heat?
Why am I so cold?
And my heart feels sick
And it hurts when I speak
And this is not what I hoped for

Rachel gingerly brushed some of Rachel's locks out of her way to reveal her neck. Slowly, she dragged the tips of her fingers in a slow loop. She smiled slightly at the small exhale she got. Although her fingers were numb, she felt the tingling sensation of Chloe's fingers gripping them.

"How long have you been awake?" Chloe sleepily murmured to her, her elbow rising to wipe her eyes.

Rachel remained silent for a moment. She answered Chloe with a kiss on the back of her neck. It earned her a tired little laugh.

"Only for a little while..." Rachel returned as she pulled her lips back. "I'm still pretending the world outside this bed doesn't exist."

The mattress shifted slightly as Chloe rounded around to face her. It gave Rachel the opportunity to free her arm. Chloe smirked slightly as Rachel shook some life back into the numbed limb and immediately settled back down.

"You're making me swoon over here, Amber," Chloe muttered to her, resting a hand underneath her head as she looked Rachel over. The sunlight radiating over Chloe's hair illuminated the touch of red interlocked in her dark blond hair.

She looked so sweet in this sunlight.

"Well..." she murmured back, a little too struck for her own good. "You're... worth the effort, Price... even if it's too early to be this charming..."

As reality slowly seeped back into her, she was once again not feeling well. Rachel clamped her mouth slow and nestled in closer to Chloe, who seemed a little startled by it at first, but relaxed into her role as comforter. With great care, she wrapped her arm around Rachel's shoulder, her chin touching the top of her head as the smaller girl listened to Chloe's pulse throbbing.

She hated doing this, being this clingy; but she couldn't bear to think about what would be unfolding over the next few hours. She didn't want to face her father... She just couldn't stare into the face that lied to her for her entire life.

"Please... Chloe... Tell me everything is going to be okay today..." Rachel moaned into Chloe's skin. "Tell me my Dad isn't going to throw any more of his shit our way and just expect me to just be... okay with it..."

Chloe remained still over her, like she seemed to be weighing the best sort of response she could give to Rachel asking her to give merit to her desire to be deluded.

"We won't... let him fuck with your head anymore. *I promise* I won't let him. But I don't know about it being okay," Chloe murmured softly. "It's... so easy to pretend... but it's going to be mess for a very long time... perhaps even forever. We just got to deal with it."

In a sea of lies Chloe was the one rock of truth. And yes, much of a fucking cliché it sounded like, that was the plain truth. Chloe continued to prove her inability to lie, or allow even allow Rachel to lie to herself. They had to remain clear and honest about everything, otherwise they would get end up making the exact same mistakes her parents had made before her.
"I hate him... so much..." she breathed out loud.

Chloe remained silent, her fingers tracing a symbol she of peace which Rachel could feel through her shirt.

"Your Dad..." Chloe slowly spoke. "He fucked up big time; but I think he's trying to do the right thing."

Rachel frowned moodily into Chloe, thankful she could not see. The thought of Chloe buying into his shit... no, that was wrong at a basic level.

"Only after all else failed him," Rachel moodily muttered into her friend... whatever they were. "He's in damage control mode. There's nothing more to it."

Chloe emitted a half-shrug.

"Damage control is just what a parent does," Chloe reminded her, still maintaining her neutrality. "It's not limited to just your Dad. You don't have to scorch earth him over this."

But she did have to go scorch earth on the fucker. It was the only way for him to understand the anger she felt at the mere passing thought she had of him. Every moment in her life was now haunted by the lie, and it was his entire fault.

The basis of his argument was not unreasonable. Sera was sick for an extremely long time. But she was better now, and he had tried to conceal that.

He should have told her sooner. He should have known this was inevitable. The fucking bastard probably did it keep his career from having a heroin addict stain running right down the middle.

"I cannot even begin to imagine how you're feeling about this," she said. "I'm not... telling you to forgive him, or even trust him, because he doesn't deserve that. But he should be allowed to at least try and make up for this shit."

Chloe's words died in her mouth. She emitted a small exhale and swallowed audibly.

"...the day will come when he won't be there for you; and it has to be so much easier when everything is settled," she tacked on. "Leaving things unsaid... hurts, so fucking much."

"Personal experience?" Rachel's monotone answered her.

Chloe released her grip of Rachel and sat up completely, breaking Rachel away from the comfort and leaving her alone. Without the heat of Chloe on her, it had already left Rachel slightly cold, and alone.

"I'm sorry..." Chloe spoke, unable to meet Rachel in the eye anymore. "I'm not... trying to make this about me... just forget it..."

As she too sat up from the bed, Rachel felt the guilt creep up.

The words 'Sad Chloe is fucking sad again' had come back to haunt her.

Chloe had her own problems, arguably far more significant than the problems she had. After seeing the shrines she had to her father around her bedroom, it became so much clearer the pain Chloe was in. A year and a half was hardly a great amount of time to heal the gaping heart torn through Chloe's heart.
At least Rachel had the opportunity to reconcile with Sera. Chloe would never be afforded even a final goodbye. She just had to limp on, and the people around her seemed perfectly fine with telling her to just fucking process it like it was no big deal. Even with three quarters of a bottle of wine in her, her violent dismissal the other day screamed loud and clear that Rachel's needs took priority over Chloe's.

This was a mistake that Rachel decided there and then she was going to fix. That she needed to fix.

"Chloe, please…" she softly pleaded the older girl to settle back down. "I want to hear what you have to say…"

Rachel sat down next to Chloe, who appeared to be embarrassed again, that her problems had seemed to be pushed back to the forefront. They were, but these were the things Rachel needed to know. Chloe had experience in world shattering events. Lessons she definitely needed to learn. If they were in it together, then Chloe had every fucking right to talk about her problems as Rachel did with hers.

Rachel dropped a hand on Chloe's, which were folded in her lap. Chloe looked up and glanced to the younger girl.

"All I'm saying is that the love you have for Dad is still there deep inside you," Chloe said, her voice uncertain. "He's still the same man who carried you down Mt. Hood. He's still the same man who was so cool and collected and soothing to you even as you were in so much pain… It's just… we have insane expectations of parents, which are... honestly fucking impossible to maintain. No one can be, perfect. Not even them… and on occasion their fuck ups are… hella epic."

Rachel remained silent as she processed what it was Chloe was saying. She didn't to admit that Chloe right, and it took a lot of effort to not get misty eyed over good memories with her father. It was just so much easier to be mad at him.

"Chloe?" she nearly croaked to the blue haired girl. "Did you ever blame your dad for the crash?"

She wasn't sure why she asked Chloe the question. It felt wrong, perverse even. If there was one thing to have taken away from her experiences with Chloe in her bedroom, it was just how much unconditional love she held for her father and even for her old friend Max Caulfield, whom Rachel hypothesized Chloe held a little more in her heart for this Max then a simple childhood friendship.

When Blade Runner had ended, a very fried Chloe ended up regaling all sorts of stories to the equally stoned Rachel. This sort of vivid recollection led her to a conclusion, these were things Chloe had obsessed on in order to be never placed into a situation where she would forget. She cherished every moment she had. Meanwhile Rachel didn't even remember the last time either of her parents had a moment of genuine laughter.

Rachel glanced over to Chloe. She was silent and obviously feeling some sort of shame for what was asked.

"No…" she murmured, unable to look back to Rachel. "…I blamed my Mom…"

Rachel squeezed the top of Chloe's hand as she attempted to process what she stated. Chloe emitted a small huff, like she couldn't believe she was saying this out loud to her.

"For the longest time, I… hated her for calling Dad for a ride that day," she continued her confession, her voice shaken as she glanced Rachel's way. "I thought… it was all her fault that he was gone. Because of her, I don't get to hug my dad, or tell him I love him, or ask him if it's… he'd
be fine with me liking… well… you."

There wasn't as much shame in the way she spoke that last line. She just seemed extremely uneasy to voice what was written on the wall. One moment she had that weird Elliot guy worshipping the very ground Chloe Price walked on, the next here they were in this quasi relationship; a friendship with all the markers of it being something more. They were both wandering into territory they never thought they'd end up, so it was only natural to have some reservations of voicing such a huge thing.

Fuck, maybe Chloe and her did need therapy and not truck ranting, where the Rachel learned how thick Chloe was when she decided to use Rachel's lap as a leg rest instead of her head, the cute, painfully thick dumbass.

"But I don't get to have any of this things answered by him," she heard the girl next to her breathe. "And as much as I fucking hate to admit it, I still blame her for it…Don't get me wrong. I love my Mom, but I'm still… still angry with her… deep… deep down…"

Rachel didn't what to say or do, but listen. Maybe that was all that was needed. Someone who could sit there and just let Chloe air all her deepest, darkest thoughts without interjecting or telling her that she was wrong to think these things. Rachel would be the bearer of her secrets.

"FUCK, I try not to think about these things… Self-destruction is so much easier…" she admitted to with a short hallowed laugh. "I'm sorry if it seems like I'm being preachy about forgiving your dad. I just… don't want you to become a resentful, petty bitch like I am."

Rachel gave her a small chastising bump. It was enough to startle Chloe a tad.

"You're not a resentful bitch…" she gently refuted. "You're hurting, and that's okay to feel like that."

Rachel fell silent and turned away as her thoughts drifted back to her own situation, only this time they were heavily muddied by Chloe's words. At the end of the day, her dad was still her Dad. In spite of all the shit that had happened in the last 48 hours, if something were to happen… if he died… She'd probably never forgive herself if she had Chloe's personal experiences on hand, but failed to apply it.

"I-I don't know if I can forgive him, or trust him… ever again…" she managed to get out, feeling Chloe's arm wrap tightly around her waist. "But I'm going to try to stop hating him…. But that might take a while…"

They returned to a state of natural feeling silence, clutching each other's hand and only faintly aware of the radio playing. There was a soft gentleness in the way Chloe sat there that she silently observed. It took all her efforts not to just lean over and kiss her as they had done the day before. That sort of intimacy had to be carefully dished out if they were going to be friends first.

Rachel gave her head a metaphorical shake. She had to cool the fuck down.

"So… do you have plans for today?" Rachel asked her… friend.

Chloe issued her a sidelong glance and a small smile.

"Unless your Dad ropes me into something, I'm going to pick my cash up from Frank," Chloe informed her. "Then I was thinking of combing the junk yard for better parts for the truck, and if there's time I'll fix up that little shack. We'll have somewhere to chill out away from shit."
Rachel nodded, she liked the idea of the junk shack more and more. It would be a quiet place to just get away.

"Sounds like a plan," she agreed. "How about you pick me up after school and we'll stop by my place. I'm sure my fucking Dad has some insulation we can use. Get it ready for winter and make it habitable. Plus... I should... you know... talk to my Mom... I've been avoiding her like Dad, and I really shouldn't be."

Wincing as she wonder just how she was going to deal with that, Rachel patted Chloe's thigh and pushed herself off the bed and did a small twirl so that she was facing her again. It was time to change the subject.

"So... is Chloe Price going to let me raid her wardrobe for something to wear?" Rachel asked coyly, her hand resting on her hip "I know you're all gangly, but I think I could pull off some of your clothing."

Throwing her hand in the direction of the dresser casually, Chloe stood up as well.

"Yeah, sure, I owe you anyway..." she said as she joined the shorter girl. "I think the bottom drawer still has clothing from when I was fucking 13... might have something that fits you."

Giggling, Rachel reached out and gave Chloe a hard shove before she silently scoured the drawers and closet. She made it a point to not to look at Chloe as she pulled off her shirt and started scouring through a box marked 'William's stuff'.

Under any other circumstances, she'd ask to hit the shower first, but fuck it. She wasn't going to fucking be herself today. With routines and perfumes and her daily make up ritual. She was fucking over it for now. Another way to tell her Dad she wasn't going to play to his expectations any more.

Not to say she was giving up basic hygiene, just today just felt like a zero fucks sort of day.

Finding a pair of skinny, frayed black jeans (as much as she hated to admit it, they were located in Chloe's 13 year old clothing drawer) she tugged them on, next came unmatched black and white socks. She was just going to settle on the shirt she slept in but paused as she noticed the pile of old clothing at the front of the bed. Sure enough there was Chloe's white wife beater with the Illuminati symbol she doodled on the front.

She looked to Chloe, who had tossed on an old plan white t-shirt and a black and blue lumber jacket. Chloe turned and looked her way as well, her eyes settling on the shirt she hadn't washed yet in Rachel's hands. She appeared a little confused.

"Dude, that's old... that's gotta be kinda rank..." she warned.

Smirking slightly, Rachel bent forward and inhaled the scent on the shirt. It was a mixture of stale cigarette smoke, weed, wine and sweat.

It smelled like her Chloe; it was perfect.

"...I guess that's why I'm choosing it," Rachel returned, tugging off her shirt as she remained locked on Chloe's widening eyes. "Gotta... mark my territory, I suppose..."

As the long undershirt came down over her, Rachel held her hands out to wait for Chloe's judgement. She watched in silence as Chloe stepped forward. There was a growing ache as she found herself buckling under the tremendous pressure that was Chloe Price's longing. She stood
there, her height difference so much more pronounced now.

She seemed to have been holding herself back, playing the exact same worries Rachel had; figuring just where to draw the line. Right now, for Rachel least, that line was blurring to something indistinguishable for the two of them.

"I told we're not just friends, Price," she murmured up to Chloe. "You can kiss me, if you'd like-"

And so Chloe did just that.

Chloe's lips slammed against hers, hurting in a good way. It was a force that banged Rachel back against the dresser, and it wasn't before long that she had found herself sitting on top of it, her arms wrapped tightly around Chloe's neck as she desperately tried to kiss back. Her brain was so overloaded that she had to manually remember to breathe.

Reaching up, Rachel pushed her hand through the back of Chloe's hair, her mouth hanging open as Chloe withdrew, her mouth instead wrapping around the front of her neck. It was again a good sort of pain, and knowing that this was how fucking Hickey's happened, Rachel found herself not giving a shit. She'd be happy to walk around in Chloe's clothing, with marks on her body, and have every fucking person in Blackwell draw their conclusions.

Chloe had taught her to stop giving a fuck, so that was what she was going to do…

"Chloe are you ready?!" Joyce called from downstairs, breaking their concentration. "Rachel, your Father is here!"

The two of them looked at each other, and even in the face of having her father downstairs, Rachel could not help but laugh as she reached out to cup Chloe's face and kiss her properly once again.

"Now you look punk rock…” Chloe said into her lips, pushing back Rachel's bangs tenderly as she stepped back.

Exhaling and eyeing up her punk girl one more time, Rachel pushed herself off the dresser and took Chloe's hand with one of her own, her other hand reaching up to muss her mane of blond hair for good measure. Grinning like a couple of idiots, the two of them grabbed their shoes and marched out of Chloe's bedroom on a mission.

They would be back here sooner or later.

Chapter End Notes

I'm keeping this chapter short so I'm not sitting through New Year's writing, which thanks to all this interest, I'd totally do. Next chapter will really come to a head.

I have noticed that they are talking like adults, or at least older than usual. In my own personal experience Teenagers have a lot of depth emotionally, but limited in communicating. It'll smooth out when the time jump to 2013 occurs.
Lyrics are from 'Happiness by the Kilowatt' by Alexisonfire. Chloe and Rachel are going to be a little more into harder material than Max's indie sensibility. I got a soundtrack and everything for them, if there's an interest in that let me know.

I'm thinking two or three more chapters before we skip on over to take a look in on Max; but we'll see. Thank you for reading and I hope to keep hearing you all.

Oh, and Happy New Years (eve)!
Sitting with Rachel and Chloe in front of Ray Well's empty office, James Amber had found his daughter far angrier with him than he had anticipated.

He had expected sound and thunder, he had counted on it. The past few days he had been playing conversational scenario after conversational scenario to be ready to counter anything she might be able to throw at him. It reminded him of the old days, during the darkest days with Sera in her downward spiral.

Unfortunately for him, there was an old saying that he had failed to take heed to, but it turned out to apply perfectly to his new situation: Generals prepare to fight for the last war. For Rachel, Rachel operated her rage in a way Sera never could.

Her rage was in her literal silence.

Standing in the doorway to the Price home, James watched Chloe lead her down the stairs. She looked rough, wearing clothing that clearly belonged to Chloe, she only spoke to Joyce to thank her for her hospitality, and pushed by James without uttering a word, without even sparing him a glance. She refused sit in the front, and the only acknowledgement of him was that she demanded Chloe to join her in the back seat.

He was a ghost to her. It had… hurt more than he had anticipated.

It gave him time to take in her appearance. She was a physical mess, her hair frayed and messed up, her make up smudged from tears, her clothing was too big for her, they had been clearly raided from Chloe's dirty clothing as they stunk of mildew, cigarettes, pot and alcohol. Worse yet was the giant hickey forming on the front of her neck, marked with teeth.

The moment he took in that, he had to glance up to look Chloe dead in the eyes. At least she gave him the courtesy of truth. It came in a guilty look and a shrug. That pretty much marked Chloe down as more than a friend to his daughter. Next time she was over, he supposed he would have to sit down and talk about it.

Preferably this would happen as he was cleaning a shotgun and drinking something with a little more kick than sherry.

As he glanced again at Chloe, who shuffled in her seat still very much aware that of him knowing about where she stood with Rachel, James silently marked 'buy one shotgun' in his list of things had to do today.

The door open behind them and Ray Wells entered his office. James stood immediately up from his seat out of respect and offered his hand to the man. The girls, on the other hand, remained locked in place. It was probably for the best, it drew Well's attention away from the silently fuming Rachel.

"Principal Wells," James greeted Ray by his title. A little jerking off another man's ego went a long way.

"Mr. Amber, how may I help you today…" Wells returned, shaking James' hand briefly before
looking at the audience.

His attention flickered from Rachel to immediately Chloe. Any warm reception he had for James vanished as he found Chloe Price staring back at him. He looked annoyed at her, like she was a pest that he could never seem to just get rid of.

"Chloe Price, I cannot seem to shake you," Ray spoke, his tone edged with elitist sardonicism at the sight of the child he booted from the school forty-eight hours prior. "I do suppose I should thank you for your role in saving the school play. If only you had taken up hobbies and participated in school project before your expulsion."

"You're welcome for the save, Ray, and for the cash flow that came instead of refunds," Chloe snapped right back. There was no fear or hesitation or respect for the older authority figure. She was a girl with nothing to lose and clear burning hatred for the man who had humiliated her in front of her friends and her mother.

It took all of James' efforts not to grin out of admiration. The gall this girl possessed at her age was absolutely astounding.

"I came here on behalf of Miss Price here and her mother, who unfortunately could not make it," James interceded so that Chloe didn't meltdown and go wild. Enjoyable as it might have seemed, it was better to keep the ball rolling.

Ray turned back from Chloe. He looked ready to continue his fight with the girl, but James' words had caught him off guard just enough to keep the fray from turning into a full-fledged conflict.

"It is unfortunate that you have wasted your time in this understandable endeavour," Wells informed James as he took a seat behind his desk. "Miss Price has flippantly thrown out all her many opportunities she was granted in light of her… tragedy. Considering the financial… difficulties, not only did we show compassion, we are certain Chloe would be better suited for public education or applying for her GED through online or community college courses. To be honest, Miss Price was never Blackwell material to begin with-"

"You're a total bastard..."

The outburst had erupted from Rachel, who for the first time since James was in her, had spoken to someone outside of Chloe. She was shaking with righteous anger in defense of her friend from the passive aggressive insults issued by the educator.

"Rachel," he warned his daughter.

Just as it was a first time she had been willing to speak in front of him, it was the first time she had looked at him. Rachel looked at him like she was ashamed to be his daughter.

Swallowing the knot in his throat, James reorganized his himself and directed his focus once again to Wells, who was staring almost fascinated by what he was witnessing between father and daughter. You didn't get to his position without first obtaining a decent skillset of observational awareness.

"Please… excuse my daughter's outbursts," James apologized on her behalf. "She's upset for a friend, it's only natural for outbursts like this."

Wells laced his fingers together. He looked from James, to the girls. His eyes stopping at Chloe, who sat there looking like she had wanted to call him something awful and perverse, or perhaps a combination of the two.
"Then perhaps she needs to find a better friend," he stated simply.

Rachel and Chloe shared a look.

And just like that, James forgot all his niceties and good nature. The gloves were coming off now. No more dancing around, it was time to get to the heart of the issue, because if he stayed he was liable to hit the man across from him.

"The way I see it, I see it you have two option," he informed Ray, his voice tinted with falsified humour. "Option One: You drop the expulsion in favour of a suspension, place her on probation for next year and we all walk away from this with mucking up everything. I'll pay for her entrance fee, no harm, no foul…

Wells, as expected, was not particularly thrilled by Option One.

He would just have to learn to accept it. Option Two… Well, it really wasn't the option a man in Ray's position would want to take a chance on.

"And option two?" Wells asked, leaning into his chair, so far unimpressed.

Gathering up the briefcase he had brought, he placed it in his lap and unlocked it. Pulling out a police file, he dropped it in front of Wells, who stared at it blankly. After a moment, he reached out and opened it, revealing several mug shots and documentation.

"My office has been keeping tabs on a Damon Merrick and his associates," James introduced the leader to Wells, his fingers tapping the sneering mug shot staring back at the educator. "Mr. Merrick is a bit of an entrepreneur; and one of his recent ventures is running controlled substances into Blackwell Academy for the expressed purposes of distribution to the athletes."

Chloe shifted nervously next to him. Yes, he was well aware of her one time job for Frank Bowers. His informant had said as much. In the grand scheme of things, he knew this only came about due to Rachel's insistence they flee from Arcadia Bay; and he didn't need an informant on that. Between their declaration on stage and Chloe's attempt to deescalate Rachel's rage at dinner the night his world got torn apart, he knew exactly what was happening to force Chloe into that desperate move.

As far he was concerned, Chloe had nothing to do with the matter.

"Tell me, Ray, since you're the professional educator here," James continued, twisting his metaphorical knife deeper and deeper into the Principal. "How is it going to look when your star athlete Drew North is busted for his part in an oxycodone smuggling ring? I'm going take a stab in the dark and assume that it's not going to go over well."

James fell silent and allowed Wells the opportunity to stew in all the awful implications and outcomes that would arise if James went in gang busters and knocked the ring down from the ground up rather than the careful neutralization of the organized ring's leadership. Blackwell Academy's reputation destroyed, all under Wells' watch.

"My office has no real interest in arresting children. Our focus remains entirely on Merrick and his partners," James assured the numbed principal. "However, that being said, illegal distribution of a controlled substance is a serious offense, especially within school grounds. One which would not only destroy the reputation of this esteemed school, but would jeopardize it. Imagine the outrage that would ensue to a doping scandal. Your competitive licences would certainly be revoked pending the investigation and hearings. Financial backers of the team would bail… but then there
The mention of the wealthy patrons of Blackwell was enough to force Ray to look back up to the DA. He was shaking in unspoken rage at being placed in this sort of position; but it was no one's fault but his own. Ray skimped on security and got exactly what was bound to happen: Chaos.

"I know you Ray," James spoke, his tone dropping the edge in favour of sympathy. "I know you'd rather drag your dick through a mile of rat traps then get into bed with the Prescott's any more than you already have to be; they would pick up the financial slack and seize total financial control over this institution. You don't want that, and I know that I don't want that."

James emitted a small sigh, if only for dramatic effect.

"But I guess all of that wouldn't matter, would it?" he pressed forward. "Once the first arrests are made, inquires will be made into your competence in providing a safe environment. You would be out of a job, or you will be placed on leave, never to educate again, which would be a shame, considering your illustrious career so far."

James leaned forward, allowing a knowing grin cross over his face. He was pulling no punches; he hadn't the time for any of this. He had a busy schedule and this glorified secretary was the smallest concern on his list at the moment.

"So here's what's going to happen," he said, his hands lacing together as the rested on Ray's desk. "You're going to place Chloe Price on suspension for the rest of the year, you'll hand her reapplication papers to sign, which will be approved come September 1st of this year. You will take my goddamn money. Or else on September 2nd, I come here with a search warrant and burn your career to the ashes."

The cards were on the table now. Ray remained locked in an intense staring down from Ray. If they had been friends once, then those days were long over. He also knew this was a potentially career ruining move, but he knew Wells would stake the reputation of the school over calling a bluff any day of the week.

"Girls, could you please wait outside?" James requested, unblinking as he stared down Wells'. "I think Principal Wells and I need some time alone now."

Rachel and Chloe glanced at each other for only a moment before they flew out of their chairs to leave James staring down the fury of Ray Wells. They did not need to be asked twice.

...
Cracking her neck she glanced away from the office and took a look at the students passing by. Some of them curious by the noise, but in large part they remained apathetic. None of them mattered to Chloe, so whatever. At least that was the case until she noticed Steph Gingrich at her locker, one of her arms was pinned down by half a dozen books. She appeared to be in the process of opening up the one next to her, which of course, belonged to Mikey North.

Pushing herself off the wall, Chloe crossed the hall and slammed her back into the locker on the other side of Steph's. The bang earned her an annoyed look from some rando couple. Chloe made a point to ignore and looked to Steph, who had turned and issued a small grin to exiled Blackhell inmate.

"Yo Steph, what's shaking?" she asked her, grabbing the arm load of books out of Steph's grasp.

"Thank you, Calimastia," she spoke gratefully as she focused on opening the locker properly. "I'm just picking up Mikey's assignments for today. I'm going to be his scribe. Hey… is there a Battle of Helms Deep re-enactment going on in Wells' office?"

She could not stop herself. Chloe issued Steph the widest of shit eating grins.

"Oh yeah, my Lawyer is in there ramming his fist, fuckin' straight up Wells' ass at the moment…" Chloe waved off. "It's looking like you're not going to be the coolest kid in Blackwell for much longer."

Steph arched her brow as a small horrified expression emerged at the graphic depiction of Wells' current status as James Amber's bitch boy.

"…then I'll have to savour every last moment before your return from exile," she replied. Steph paused and glanced at the blue fringe.

"Cool hair by the way," she added. "I won't ask if Rachel Amber's was the inspiration…"

The small knowing smirk on Steph's face did more damage to Chloe's cockiness than she had ever anticipated. It became painfully clear that she was standing in front of probably the only person she had ever met who was clear minded about her sexual attractions on the same sex, and there Steph stood, gently poking holes through Chloe's armour.

Sooner rather than later, she was going to have to take Steph up on her offer to talk. There was only two other people in her life she'd feel she could talk about this. One was the object of her attraction, the other was gone and never coming back.

"Well… yeah… maybe…" she said, knowing how stupid she must have sounded as she rubbed her neck, which only made things worse, because it gave Steph the opportunity to look at Rachel's bracelet which still store wore.

The smirk washed away from Steph's expression. Her small warm smile had thankfully returned as she closed Mikey's locker.

"Mikey told me what happened the other day, that you stopped that Damon guy from beating up Drew," she said, changing the subject, but not entirely for the better. "That was really cool of you, Chloe."

Chloe eyed Steph wearily as the guilt of what had happened on Saturday returned to the center of her mind. She had actually thought that there was an appeal to crime; on first contact she had seen what her actions had done. All they did was hurt people who didn't deserve it.
"He doesn't blame you for what happened, Chloe," she gently reassured her. "You giving the money to this Damon asshole was the best move."

"I keep hearing that, but it doesn't make me feel any better…" Chloe muttered back. It didn't matter how much reinforcement she got, she was still going to feel like shit over this whole awful thing.

Steph reached out and took the hold of Chloe's forearm, the touch surprising her. She looked up and met Steph sharp blue eyes.

"It wasn't an easy thing, but Chloe… you did the right thing," she stated to the taller girl. "Drew was desperate, and desperate people do stupid things like jump in bed with drug dealers, then not give up the money they owe to said dealers. He made a mistake, and he was lucky as hell you were there… I mean, if Drew had lost his scholarship…"

Steph trailed off, her head gently shaking as though she was attempting to purge the thought out of her mind. Chloe rubbed her neck, she got it. Drew had painted the picture clear about the state of his family. The North family needed him to carry them, which was a responsibility no one Drew's age should have been forced to have to do.

"If I'm being honest… if I was in the same situation Drew was, I might not be too proud to do that as well…" she murmured to Steph, shrugging.

"Yeah, me too," Steph agreed with her. "If there was one person who needed a punch in the dick, it's this Damon guy."

Chloe did a double take at the slightly smirking girl.

"In the dick?" Chloe faintly repeated.

Steph nodded gravely.

"Right in the dick," She confirmed, offering no wiggle room on the subject. "No one hurts Mikey ever again, not on my watch."

Chloe looked on Steph with a deeper respect for the girl. Chloe didn't know much in life, but she now knew that she would never want to face down a pissed off Steph Gingrich.

"I take it back," Chloe said, impressed by her. "When I get back into school, you can keep the Coolest Person in Blackwell title."

As Steph looked close to blushing, down the hallway the girl's bathroom door opened and out stepped Rachel, her hand running through her mused hair again. She had paused for a moment to take in her surroundings and paused as she noticed Chloe standing by Steph next to her locker. Steph rounded on Chloe for a moment. There seemed to be a mixture of awe and shock in her eyes.

"Hey Steph," Rachel greeted as she stood next to Chloe. "How are you doing?"
Glancing to Chloe for a moment, Steph exhaled and turned to face slightly smirking Rachel. As calm and collected as she might have seemed, Rachel looked close to melting down. Chloe could see it in her eyes. They darted in the direction of the Administrative offices. It would not be long now before James came out.

"Fine," Steph broke the strained silence. "We're just talking about… stuff…"

"Mikey stuff?" Rachel inquired, her voice growing concerned in spite of never speaking to the boy before. "God, what a fucking thing to happen to him, he's seems so nice. Would it be too much for the two of us to drop by the hospital and check in?"

Chloe watched as Steph smiled widely and nodded. She ignored the small surge of jealousy that washed over her for a moment. She wasn't going to play that game with Steph. She was too sweet.

"Not at all, Mikey would love more visitors," Steph said excitedly. "Why don't you two drop by after school sometime? There's a D&D scenario I've been working on the past couple days. I'm calling it 'Escape from Fortress Laitosh'. Elamon is trapped in prison after killing Duurgaron. I got Drew recruited to fight to free Elamon as a Paladin named Kalerius the Unbroken. Mikey and him have been building his character for days, and he's totally into it. You two should totally come and join the game. I… might just know a spell that brings Callimastia back from the dead…"

"Fucking sweet!" Chloe exclaimed, for getting that strange flash of emotion as her fist pumping outwards. She froze as she noticed Rachel looking up at her with her brow raised.

"I mean… sure, whatever… nerds…" she lamely for good measure.

 Emitting a small huff, Rachel swung her hip and checked Chloe hard enough to stagger her slightly.

"Don't deny what you are, Price," she teased Chloe before turning back to Steph. "Never tabletopped before. We'll be there, if you're gentle on me…"

As Steph blinked and nodded, the administration office doors opened and out stepped James Amber. He was looked well beyond agitated. He only spared Rachel, Chloe and Steph a parting glance.

"Girls, parking lot right now." he commanded before he stepped heavily towards the nearest exit he could find.

The three girls shared a look. Steph stood there, her eyes wide as tracked James until he had left the school. Rachel exhaled heavily.

"Sorry Steph, DA Fuckface is calling us," she grumbled mutinously. "I'll see you in class?"

Steph nodded blankly, and with one final parting glance and smile to Chloe, Rachel followed after her father. Probably the last thing she wanted to do, but there she was doing it anyway. After two days of silence, she was going to finally talk to her dad… all for Chloe's sake.

As soon as Rachel was out of earshot, Steph rounded back to Chloe.

"So… let me get it straight," she spoke, her voice barely more than a whisper as she looked at Chloe incredulously. "You're basically with his daughter, and he's already getting you out of trouble you pretty much brought on yourself? How in the hell can you get that lucky?"

Chloe cleared her throat dramatically
"What can I say?" Chloe retuned as she handed the pile of books back to Steph. "Trying to tame a dragon has its rewards."

Clasping Steph on the shoulder Chloe followed after Rachel, leaving the Queen of the Indoor Kids still in a state of growing confusion and perhaps some unintended envy.

...

Trailing a good twenty yards behind her father, Rachel Amber tried her utmost to remain as cool as she could in the face of the overwhelming desire to go to war against her own dad right in front of the entire academy.

Right now, nothing outside the tension between father, daughter and her new best friend mattered.

She was only vague aware that she had walked by Victoria Chase, looking ravished, and clinging onto Chloe's hand as she walked like a zombie in the direction of the parking lot. She didn't pay attention to Eliot Hampden as he looked at her like she had kicked his puppy.

She didn't care about the rumours that would spread faster than the fire she had started. The only thing that mattered now was what she would say to her Dad. That was if she even wanted to talk at all. She had only promised Chloe that she would listen what he had to say.

Perhaps that was all she should do. Listen and bide her time until she could properly string together coherent sentences of how betrayed she had felt. She didn't want to stand there and babble out a string of nonsense to her father. He needed to know exactly what she felt. How much his lies had destroyed the world she had known.

Chloe's warning about unsaid things came back to her thoughts. Dad had attempted to explain, why he did what he did, but she was barely coherent to pay it attention. Now that she had a few days, it might have been time to actually listen. The last thing she wanted was for things to be left unsaid. Even if it meant having to listen to him attempt to somehow justify his actions.

Here are your papers, Chloe have them notarized by yourself and your mother and deliver it to me. The second is a contract pertaining to your probation period which will last all next school year before it is lifted. Wells was insistent on you taking up certain... academic activities to help motivate your success. So I signed you up for Drama class.

Noticing Chloe was looking back; Rachel turned and found that they had been tailed by Hampden. Chloe looked frazzled and nodded her head in an attempt to shoo him the fuck out of their business. An unnatural fury at the intrusion startled the smaller girl. What in the fuck gave him the right to casually creep into their business?

As her dad turned back, he too had noticed the boy. He pushed by Rachel and Chloe and stared at him.

"Can we help you?" he inquired, breaking the silence.

"Can I... ahhh... talk to Chloe for a moment?" Eliot spoke up, his voice was friendly but here seemed something... off about it.

Turning away from the teen, Dad glanced at Chloe. Chloe was red in the face and unable to look up from her shoes, as though she was ashamed or something. She emitted the smallest of head
shakes. Rachel stepped closer to Chloe and gripped onto her arm properly, giving her a reassuring smile. In spite of the reassurance, Chloe remained locked in place. Was it guilt? They had been close.

Whatever it had been, Rachel knew she didn't like it.

With the discomfort in Chloe this palpable, Dad stepped directly in front of Chloe's line of sight with Eliot, shielding her away from the strange gaze of the boy.

"No, you may not," Dad replied in a calm but authoritative voice. "Could you please allow us some space for a private conversation? We would appreciate that, thank you."

Smart enough to know not to push it any further; Hampden attempted to get one last glance at Chloe by tilting to his left. Dad mimicked him, his expression hardening as he continued to shield Chloe behind him.

"I'm so sorry..." she whispered to the shorter girl. "I gotta fix that mess soon..."

Rachel squeezed her hand tightly.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," she reminded her, looking to her father.

Dad was still standing there, watching the Hampden boy retreat to a safe distance, Dad looked like he had something to say. Instead he dug into his briefcase. If he did, he chose intend to keep it for himself, or save it for later when she wasn't around. Rachel wasn't sure if she liked the silence he held, but she did... appreciate what he had done.

"Here are your papers, Chloe. Have them notarized by yourself and your mother and deliver it to me," he said as he handed a stack of documentation to the girl. "The second is a contract pertaining to your probation period which will last all next school year before it is lifted. Wells was insistent on you taking up certain… academic activities to help motivate your success. So I signed you up for Drama class."

Pausing for a moment, Dad looked over Chloe examining the papers.

"I'm required to take personal responsibility for your actions," he added, catching Chloe's attention. "So please… try not to push them too much."

Chloe remained focused on the papers. There was the strangest mixture of resignation and relief written on her face. She had spent the weekend writing off her educational future, but now here she was, about to be reenrolled back into school from the actions of the man standing in front of her. Chloe was a proud person. She didn't take perceived hand-outs lightly.

She looked and found the Ambers looking at her. She emitted a small grin as she looked from Rachel, to Dad who thankfully wasn't being smug about what he had done. Instead, all that he did was quietly wait for Chloe to say something, anything.

"I... shit, thank you Mr. A," Chloe spoke in her standard elegance. "You came through... You know you're basically going to be my Mom's favourite person from now on, right?"

Dad allowed a ghost of a smile to cross over his mouth.

"You'll find your tuition cost has been cut in half, I did some digging last night, and found you were eligible for a scholarship, which you failed to apply for," he spoke up, breaking his silence. "With everything that happened, it's understandable why you didn't see to applying for it. I filed the
paperwork this morning, and I am more than certain you'll get it."

Chloe remained silent, shifting in place as she seemed at a loss of words. She could not even look at Dad. Both Ambers knew the reason why. This would go a long ways towards getting the Price family out of the grips of financial strain from school costs.

Rachel wanted to be as happy for as she deserved, but she couldn't. Not totally, not with that nagging voice in the back of her head telling that this was not nearly as altruistic as it appeared. It seemed to her that her Dad was just tying the noose around the Price family's neck, forcing them more and more into his sphere of influence. This sort of control was far reaching. With Rachel so close to Chloe, it was inevitable that she too would get tangled up in this.

This was exactly what he wanted; a quiet reestablishment of control over everyone in his life in light of the unforeseen discovery of Sera. It was so fucking typical of him.

"Mr. Keaton is going to freak he's going to get a new star…" Rachel spoke up finally, looking to Chloe as hatred for her father ebbed back into her heart. "Maybe we could bully him into a production of Blade Runner…"

Chloe made a face and rolled her eyes at her. Even now she was still pretending like she hadn't enjoyed her new stage career.

Breaking up the moment was a cough. Rachel and Chloe turned and found Dad standing there, looking like he was ready to get to the business at hand. Chloe remained locked in place, her expression hardening as she stared at Dad as though he was being room.

Rachel felt her heart flutter. In spite of the generosity shown to her by dad, Chloe still stood by her. Dad could have given her the world, and she would be shaken from her support. This raised her spirits for a moment, only to be crushed by the guilt that she actually thought that for a moment Chloe would do anything less.

Reaching out, Rachel touched her Chloe's bicep. The taller girl looked back to her, and Rachel emitted a smile stained by the guilt and shame she felt.

"It's okay Chloe…" she reassured her gently. "I got this."

Chloe looked her over carefully, as though she was looking to see if Rachel was actually ready to do this. She wasn't, but she had come to terms with that. Exhaling and making a point not to look to Dad, Chloe leaned in and brushed her lips on Rachel's forehead before she turned back.

Dad stepped out of way and impassively gestured to the car, a silent offer to the girl for a ride back to her home. Chloe stepped by him and walked off, leaving Rachel alone with her father for the first time in what felt like forever. It was certainly the first time in her new reality.

The two remained silent, neither of them knowing just where to start. She watched as Dad stepped past her and took a seat on the steps. He looked up at her, his hand patting the concrete step he sat on.

Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, Rachel obliged him and took the seat he had offered.

"Is there actually a scholarship for her?" Rachel started first, her voice neutral as she examined her father impassively.

Dad did not look at her. His eyes remain distant, like he was at a state of attention.
"Does it matter?" he asked her just as impassively as she had.

"It does if you're buying off my friend for your own goals," Rachel fired back right away.

Dad remained still and silent as he watched Chloe climb into the front seat and closed the door behind her.

"I know her better than you think, Rachel..." Dad murmured. "She's... all too familiar..."

Breaking his distant stare, he turned his attention back to Rachel. His expression was far sterner than it had been.

"This is a hard fact to swallow, but everything I do doesn't have to revolve completely around you," he informed her piercingly. "But go ahead, Sunshine. You go ahead and tell her that the scholarship comes out of my pocket. You'll get to watch from the front row as she throws it away, and then her second chance at an education as well. For you, she would give up everything and anything..."

Sunshine. She hadn't heard that childhood nickname in years. It only made things worse. She felt sick as her dad's assessment of Chloe Price was brutally spot on.

Silently, Dad reached out and took her right hand into his.

"I need you to understand the power you have over that girl, the length she could go for you with just one word from you," he pressed on, unblinking as he held his eyes on her. "Loyalty is one of the rarest gifts on this planet, Rachel. That girl will discard everything away for you if you were to ask it. If you care for her, you won't treat it like its blasé."

He trailed of as his rant simmered down and was left lurking now in Rachel's thoughts. Satisfied that she seemed to have gotten the message, Dad let go of her hand.

"I... hurt you in a way that you will never heal," he said in a smaller voice. "Don't make that same mistake with her..."

Looking at her Dad and the expression he wore. There was visible shame in every facet of him. Although she could never express it, there was a small part in her that... might have believed he felt this strongly. That maybe this lie had hurt him as much as it had hurt her. She could not imagine what it must have been like spending 13 years in fear that the truth would come out.

"I'm meeting Sera tonight," he announced, thankfully breaking Rachel away from the growing doubt. "We'll discuss the conditions to how she's going to slowly reintegrated back into your life."

Rachel looked away from him and nodded stiffly. Chloe had already made it clear this was what he wanted to do. This was just a confirmation.

"I need you cool your expectations of this as well," he spoke again as he looked away from her as well. "A recovering addict is one bad day away from a relapse, especially for someone newly sober. Sera must be handled delicately by you. There will be ground rules and supervision, and I do not want you to be under the impression you're getting unlimited access to her because this is happening. One day perhaps, but now is not the time for that."

Running her hand over her face, Rachel pushed herself off the steps and swiftly moved away several paces from him, her arms crossing over her chest as she looked at Chloe sitting in Dad's car, pretending not to look their way. The conversation was done in her opinion. Sera and she were going to meet. That was the end of it.
"I don't expect your forgiveness, Rachel…” she heard her Dad admit as he stood up. "But I don't want to go the rest my life knowing I did nothing when something had to be done. Everything I ever did was meant to protect you from her demons, but all it did was hurt you that much more."

The pain in the pit of her chest had returned, She looked at Chloe, who was looking her way. What she would do to just be back in Chloe's bed again, pretending the world didn't exist…

"If I could do it all again, I would have told you five years ago… but I can't," he continued on as Rachel held her back on him. "I just have to limp on knowing how much wrong I have done to you, and that things between us will never be the same. The girl, who'd drag me out of my work so we can act and play together – and these moments might not have much meaning to you, but for me they were the only things that kept me from getting lost in all the shit my job entails - is never coming back to me; and I'm going to miss that so damn much…"

Rachel turned back to face her father, who was standing there, his mouth pushed together like he was struggling to remain his composure. She wanted to leap forward and hug and cry and hit him, and tell him that she loved him with all her heart in spite of all this shit that had gone down. He was still her dad, and she would never stop loving him.

"I think I want to move onto campus full time," she said instead.

There was no malice or spite in her words; it was just a tired recognition that everything was broken between them. For her, this was as close to divorce as she could come up with sort of emancipation. She didn't want that sort of finality. There was still chance, but she just needed to get away out of arms reach of her parents.

Dad stared at her like his heart had been broken right in front of her with such a simple request. It was the worst fucking feeling Rachel had ever had in her life. The lie was one thing, but standing there was man whom she shared her entire with… and she had told him she was just... done.

"If that is what you would like, I'll… look into it," he spoke in a slow monotone.

Silence returned between daughter and father. Rachel felt ill, she just wanted to walk away, but the idea of her dad standing there alone reeling from this was too much to handle, too much of anchor to keep her from fleeing back to school.

"Are you coming home tonight?" he quietly asked her.

Rachel looked at him for a moment before she nodded stiffly.

"I will… but I'm inviting Chloe over to stay the night," she returned, unable to look him in the eye. "I want to know about Sera… and not just the bad things."

"If Chloe's mother is fine with this, then of course," Dad allowed. "After dinner I'll tell you everything you wish to know."

With that, Rachel nodded and stepped back to the stairs so that she could head back to school and reorganize herself for tonight. But before she stepped by her Dad, he reached out and grabbed her by his arm, bringing her to a stop.

"Look…” he said to her, his tone lightening up somewhat as he nodded in the direction of Chloe.

Rachel eyed him with a scrutinizing expression for a moment before she decided to look Chloe's way. Silently she looked at the girl in the front seat, fidgeting like mad, like she was worried to be left alone with James Amber.
"See that face?" he spoke again. "That's the expression one gets when they're aware they're about to get reamed by an interrogative father. I should know, I had that look on my face more than once at her age."

Rachel closed her eyes and groaned. Although she wanted to get honesty from her dad, she really didn't need to know that much about him.

"I know you're just friends, but is it too early to insist we make up the guest room for her tonight?" he went on without missing a beat.

Dad gestured to the mark Chloe left on her neck.

"That right there would be an assault and battery charge in most cases. Do you think I should go that angle on her tonight?" he asked her, his grin widening. "I could mention it tonight at dinner. We could watch her squirm for our dining entertainment…"

In spite of everything, Rachel could help but emit a laugh. Chloe didn't deserve that sort of teasing… not yet, at least. It should have to wait until the friendship they were investing in bloomed into something more. The last thing she wanted was for Chloe to get scared off now.

"I got you to smile…" Dad murmured as he released his hand off her arm and stepped out of her way. "I'll take that small win."

Rachel nodded to him; it was a small acknowledgement to that. With a final look to Chloe, she turned away and headed back to school, her thoughts racing with everything that was spoken between father and daughter. Perhaps one day things would get better, but that day would not arrive for a very long time.

There was still a lot of healing left to do first.

Chapter End Notes

This Chapter came out extremely fast. In fact I had it mostly done before I went out for New Years.

I'm thinking about doing a D&D chapter of 'Escape from Fortress Laitosh' Let me know if there's an interest.

Next Chapter: James and Sera settle accounts.
She was here, and he shouldn't have been as nervous as he was.

Fifteen years after the collapse of their marriage, James Amber still found himself high-strung about her as he slowly approached Sera Gearhardt. It was a strange feeling, about to get even stranger as he ran through just how it was he was going to work her back into his life after spending so many years keeping her far away.

Now here he was, openly discussing her with Rachel; and Rose somehow finding the dignity and strength to let him interact with Sera without fearing the marriage would collapse. He loved his wife dearly for her continued trust in him. After the kiss… he wouldn't do that ever again. He had screwed all of this up enough already.

Sera was sitting at the end of the pier, wearing a black and white polka dot dress, her hair pulled back in a loose pony-tail. She was watching the Bay as several fishing boat left dock, steaming towards their fishing sites.

Clutching onto his carry-out tray, James approached Sera, whose back was still turned to him, still sitting there basking in the warm late spring sunshine. She seemed so… at peace with everything, the conflicts she battled inside her were just… gone.

He didn't know why after all this time he still felt like a damn kid approaching the prom queen. It was… some unusual sway she just possessed, and not the passage of time, or her substance abuse problem had done a thing to lessen the effects. It was the sort of radiance she must have certainly passed on to Rachel. The charm and natural charisma which Rachel possessed… well… she certainly didn't get that from him.

Wood creaked under his pressure, causing Sera to break her silent observation of the bay. She turned back and found James just standing there, suddenly at a loss of words as his ex-wife quietly examined him.

"James…" she breathed, her weary eyes looking at him with an understandably high amount of suspicion after their previous encounter.

No longer able to put it off, James gathered his senses and stepped forward towards Sera. She remained completely motionless as he approached her. Her hands were folded in her lap as though she was sitting, waiting for a verdict. There was a trace of rage in her expression, which was tempered by the curiosity she had when he called her this morning.

"Sera, I'm sorry that I'm late," he returned, finally finding his voice. "I brought tea… Darjeeling with lemon… and one golden sugar, right?"

As James pulled her tea out for her and extended it in her direction, Sera blinked. In spite of her anger, a ghost of a smile slowly crossed over her mouth.

Silently, Sera took her drink, her hands shaking. Briefly he wondered if it was out of her sobriety, or out of fear of the man standing over her. He did not know which was worse.
"I..." Sera murmured, her hand digging into her pocket. "Brought the cigarettes, if you still smoke that is..."

As James did with the tea, so too did Sera with the open pack of cigarettes in her hand. James looked at it for a moment, before he reached out and took one from her pack. Sera smiled again and looked away from him, her hand reaching out and patting the spot next to her on the bench.

Looking at it with a moment's hesitation, James accepted the invitation and silently took a seat next to her, pulling his earl grey, milk and two sugars out of the tray and took a sip. Sera dug into her purse and withdrew her lighter, flicking it alive so that James could light up.

The two of them remained silent, looking out over the bay. James inhaled a mouthful of smoke as Sera carefully sipped her tea. He glanced her way to see that she was returning the look.

Her smile spoke volumes to him.

"I... can't believe you remembered after all this time..." she observed, almost amused by the fact.

James shrugged as he swallowed a sip of his own tea.

"Imprinted memories, I suppose..." he speculated for her. "I find that these... little things are hard to forget."

Sera nodded and sipped her tea again as she pulled a cigarette out for herself. She lit it up casually between her fingers before she placed it in her lips. Her eyes fell to her lap as she seemed to be in the middle of debating saying something. James remained silent; he would give her any opportunity she needed to say what was on her mind.

"I think of those days still... that's not to say I'm living in the past, but I do allow myself to think of our good moments," she confessed, looking up his way. "Living in our little loft in Santa Monica, drinking tea, smoking cigarettes... me, just finished working some shit job. You, a bright eyed law student, working early mornings, coming home from UCLA every night to our slum, beaten down, exhausted, yet still believing you could change the world..."

James could not help but chuckle. It was hard to believe those days actually happened still. That there used to be a good era for Sera and James; but there were good times. Perhaps he tried his best to erase these things. The pain of remembrance of these happy times was so much worse than devoting a decade and a half seething with anxiety, fear and loathing for when their relationship finally collapsed on itself.

It was this that gave him an enemy and hatred to fuel his resolve to never return to her, to never allow their child to be harmed by her.

Now here he was... sitting with his worst enemy; his first love. Years of isolation destroyed because of two snooping teen girls.

"Yeah... funny how it goes..." James spoke up, tapping his cigarette. "You think you can do good... but in the end you just contribute to the decline. Look at us; we ended up as Gen-X stereotypes... go figure..."

The pair of them shared a small subdued self-decrepitating laugh as they lapsed into surprisingly good natured silence. James had to admit it was so much easier this time around then it had been last Friday. Between the secret being out, and knowing where each other stood, it made this... smoother.
As they smoke and drank their tea in silence, James found an overriding sense of... duty, he supposed to Rachel. She needed to understand the gravitas, her heroin addiction had had on his, life, on Rachel's, and that a year of sobriety and the subsequent rejection of his money didn't amount to much in the big picture. The rejection of her daughter had to be at the forefront of everything from now on. If she wanted a place at Rachel's side, this had to be.

Reaching into his pocket, James removed his wallet. He opened it to pull out an old photograph of Rachel in a white tutu, her hair pinned back by a clip. Looking at it for a moment, he offered it out to Sera, without looking at her.

"This was when she was 11," he spoke out loud, unable to Sera in the eye. "She had it in her mind she wanted to be a prima ballerina when she grew up. She was... well... objectively, she was awful."

Out of the blue, he felt Sera smack his arm. Rubbing his arm dramatically, he looked and found the woman almost outraged at the suggestion Rachel might have been terrible at something, which she certainly was. The girl was all knees and elbows at that age, and terribly clumsy.

"How could you say that about your daughter?" Sera said, barely able to conceal a grin. She looked like she wanted to laugh at the perfectly reasonable statement

"Well, you didn't see her try ballet," James pointed out as he brought his cigarette to his lips. "I love her, but she was terrible."

The two of them laughed and like porcelain, Sera gingerly placed the new memory of Rachel into her purse. Her hand rose up to briefly cover her mouth. She looked up and turned to James.

"...Thank you, James," she whispered to him. "For this... glimpse..."

As James nodded, Sera turned away. Her hands gripped onto her purse tightly as though she unconsciously feared he would have second thoughts on his small gift and reach over and snatch the photo away from her. He could understand why. He had to set himself up as a gatekeeper, and main function of a gatekeeper was to keep out those who were unwelcomed.

... Like he had to do to Sera for all these years...

"I was... surprised that you called me," she admitted as she raised her cigarette. "I didn't think I would be getting a response from you ever again... at least not without litigation."

Litigation, this was probably the most driving factor to this change in Sera policy, only second to that of Rachel. Sera's presence was only going to bring about a storm of controversy. In a small town, it was to be expected. When he went to bed on Sunday morning, he had decided there and then he needed to get out ahead of it, and for starters a civil case had to be avoided at all costs.

"I know we didn't end our encounter on Friday the best way," James admitted as he gripped his tea. "I'm... sorry that it ended the way it did."

Sera nodded plainly, her eyes lowered again to her lap.

"We did it the wrong way," she agreed as she looked up to him. "I was... angry that you kept blocking me this past year. I should have seen you were... scared of me, scared of everything you built... just crashing down on you. I do get it, James. It's just, I get so impatient with everything and I forget... I forget I'm not in the best position to make demands..."

James huffed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he quietly contemplated and
"I was scared of you… and I am of scared of you still," he confessed to her. "To cut the long story short, Rachel knows about you. She tracked us down to our meeting, she saw the kiss… she thought you were my mistress, and I told her the truth about who you were to her."

The truth was out now. Sera now knew Rachel was very much aware of just who she was. He glanced her way and found her eyes were wide, her mouth slightly hanging up as she looked at James like she feared he was lying to her. He wasn't. He wished he was, but it was the truth.

"How did she take it?" Sera breathed slowly, her words were carefully camouflaged with neutrality, so that she did not get her hopes high.

James flicked the cigarette butt into the Bay.

"How do you suppose that she took it?" James muttered as he straightened himself up. "It broke everything she's ever known. She… doesn't trust me with anything, anymore. I don't know if she ever will again... so, Rose and I agreed that for everyone's sake, you will be permitted to be in contact with her."

"But you don't want it..." Sera correctly guessed, holding her cigarettes back out to him.

Eyeing it carefully, James took another one and let Sera light him back up.

"What I want is no longer relevant. I don't have much of a choice anymore," he said, exhaling a plume of smoke out of his nostrils slowly. "One way or another, Rachel's going to see you. It's in her nature to game the system until she gets what she desires…. So I think it'll be better I try to make it... sterile... and safe."

Sera squinted at him through their combined cigarette smoke.

"Do you actually think I'll do something to her?" she asked him, clearly attempting to displace her growing anger with curiosity. "James, I would never hurt her..."

James nodded reassuringly for her.

"I know that, at least that is what I would like to believe. I know it wouldn't be intentional," he said softly. "I'm not just looking out for her, but you as well. If she loses her temper, it might lead to... old familiar feelings... and despite what you probably think, I wouldn't want you to slide back... not now..."

He trailed off for a moment as he let her contemplate this.

"Rachel is..." he started, struggling to find the right words. "Rachel is by far more... dangerous then you are, because she has me in her as well."

Leaving that observation hanging between the two of them, James cleared his throat. He had to return back to a state of professionalism. It was the only way he felt he would be able to convey what needed to get across to Rachel's biological mother. She needed to understand that there could not be any sort of circumvention for the time being. If she was serious about her efforts to end this peacefully, and see her child again, it had to be agreed upon here and now.

"So here we are now. Rachel knows, and we have to come to an agreement," he summed up, his district attorney professionalism etched back into his words. "I promised Rachel that I would make the arrangements, and Rachel has conceded I am within my rights to relay certain and
reasonable… *conditions* you must meet and maintain. Are you willing to hear me out?"

Sera looked at James dead in the eyes and nodded gravely. There was no hesitation he could see.

"I am."

James held his gaze on her a moments longer before he continued.

"First, your sobriety is a given, but there are others," he started, unblinking as he turned in place to face her fully. "Your visitations are supervised and scheduled so that Rose and I are ready to receive you. If you want to spend some alone time with her in our home, we won't barge in or interfere, but ultimately the environment must be under our control."

Sera did not protest, she sat there quietly, her hands folded again in her lap.

"Next, you cannot run with the Merrick crew anymore," he pressed on, noticing Sera wince slightly at the idea that she had been caught in the act. "No more going to their parties, no more interaction with any of them from here on out. If you want a *place* in Rachel's life, you're keeping your activities clean, and not just your body."

In spite of her guilty expression, she wordlessly inclined her head. James could not help but feel relieved. She wasn't beating herself up over her lapse in judgement.

Maybe there was hope for her.

"If you are going to stay here, you'll need employment, *actual* employment," he continued, his head shifting to one side.

Sera emitted a small chuckle.

"I don't know where I would start to get that…" she murmured uncertainly, her tone filled with shame for not having that. "I don't have a resume or anything, and I have record and people aren't exactly looking to overlook that…"

"I'll help you get a job, if you are agreeing to this," James interjected, holding his hand up and hoping to soothe some of Sera's trepidation to the task. "I know a few places and people; we'll sort this out together. Your first meeting with Rachel, I'll let the employment clause side, but after that…"

Sera smiled and looked at him she was starting to get the picture.

"I understand James…" she spoke breathlessly, as though it was starting to all come together now. "I would like your help, *please*."

"Well… you have it then, Sera," James promised her.

His conditions were spelt out, allowing the two parties to return to some measure of relaxation. James and Sera returned to their cooling tea and cigarettes, silently watching the Bay again. James wasn't sure why he never paused to do this before. It was a nice distraction from everything. He supposed it had something to do with hi keeping his nose down in his work until everything else in his life imploded around him.

"Hard to… believe our problems from a decade and a half ago can still bubble back up and destroy everything we know," Sera murmured next to him as she tapped out her cigarette. "If I could do it over again…"
James smirked as he rested one leg over the other.

"I blame the grunge scene..." James said as he exhaled smoke. "God, the early nineties were so fucking awful."

Sera squinted at him for a moment before she emitted a small laugh.

"It wasn't all bad," she countered with a smirk of her own. "Lots of cute guys came out of that scene."

James rolled his eyes.

"What, I wasn't cute enough for you?" James asked, eyeing her with an amused expression which he was unable to be kept off his face. "Besides, Nirvana was pretty fucking overrated. What was so cute about watching a 90 pound millionaire spouting fucking gibberish? Did he think he was being profound? He wasn't. He complained about his shit, but he didn't bother to fix anything and left his daughter fatherless... and I sound like I'm old again..."

Sera sort of grinned as she turned away. She didn't seem to want to confirm this unfortunate reality.

"Staley... well... can't crush on him for obvious reasons," Sera said causally. "Cornell was... is gorgeous... Corgan was pretty cute before he went bald."

James leaned back into his own seat. Corgan was alright until he went up his own ass.

"I always thought Reznor blew them all out of the water..." James admitted to her. "Honestly, it's hard to believe that guy is still alive... kind of reminds me of you, actually."

Sera looked over to him.

"What, that he got better looking with age?" she retorted. Sera paused and seemed to think about it before adding. "You know what... that is a good choice. If Rachel is being angsty, I'll just get her The Fragile... works like a charm for me."

The two of the chuckled as their note comparisons drained up. They turned away from each other. Sera drank the last of her tea and straightened out the hem of her dress as James checked his phone for any messages from Rose or work. As nice as it was there was still a level of discomfort he felt as he sat here with her. It shouldn't have felt this natural to click back with Sera Gearhardt. Not after everything they had done to each other.

"God, Sera, I have tried to hate you for 15 years... I tried to treat you like poison... because that's what you were. Not just to Rachel, but to me personally," he broke the silence, his voice straining as he struggled to keep his feelings in check. "I loved you with everything I had... but everything I ever did... it was never enough for you, and I still... don't know why it wasn't..."

James felt Sera's hand reach out and squeeze his.

"I know, James... I don't know why, either," Sera whispered, looked just as troubled by the past as he felt. "God, I thought it was only your fault until I sobered up. Since then, I see now everything I did to you... to Rachel; and it's so awful to think about. Everything you did, you did for her, and yes, it was the right thing cutting me out."

Exhaling, Sera shuffled closer, her hand squeezing his tighter.

"But I'm healthy now, and I don't ever want to return to that self-imposed hell, and I want
to try James… I want to be better then what I was," Sera pressed forward, her eyes darting back and forth. "I know I can't be her mother. That would be so incredibly unfair to your wife; but I want to be there, and I want to know her. I want to help her understand why what you did was necessary."

For the first time in what felt like forever, James found himself stuck in a quandary with her. The way he heard her speak, the clear denunciation of who she was… it was hard not to think that Rachel was right on Saturday night, that maybe she was indeed getting better. If this was truth, then maybe there could be something more between them than the Gatekeeper and the Damned. Maybe there was a chance for a friendship with her again…

After all these years, to get back his friend… it was unbelievable.

As powerful a feeling as this was to have, he could not forget everything. She was still sick, and a liar, an ex-criminal and recovering addict. Just because there was a good couple moments in the here and now did not mean they erased her past. If she was committed to change, she would get her forgiveness… but now… now he had to be realistic.

"Okay then…" James agreed as he stood up. "I'll be in touch about the meeting…"

Sera launched herself out of her place on the bench, her hand gripping onto his jacket as she looked up to him.

"Could you… help me get a job… like… right now?" she asked him, her voice small and almost desperate now. "I'm not… trying to score points and get an early meeting. I just… James, I've done the wrong things for so long in my life, and now… I've wanted to turn it all around, but I still have no clue how on my own... sobriety is a start, but you're right, there has to be more."

James stared back at her for a moment. The desperation and heart break in her eyes… it was something he just couldn't ignore. Not now.

"Alright then…" he repeated his affirmation. "I'll call into the office, cancel my afternoon appointments. We'll arrange something."

James reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved an envelope. Sera froze and looked at it. He didn't need to say anything; in his hand was the 12 months of cash which she had been rejecting all this time.

"James, I don't want the money," she stated. She looked offended by its very presence.

Unblinking, James pressed it into the palm of her hand.

"I realize that you don't want it; but it's your fresh start start-up fund," he proposed. "We'll find you somewhere nice to rent out; get you out a motel and settled into town. If you want to pay me back, that is your prerogative, but you're going to take the money and get on your feet properly with it."

He stepped back, leaving her staring at the envelop clinched inside her hand. She looked up at James. He watched as the shame and embarassmnt gave way for something new, and something better; a small smile slowly crossing back on her face.

It wasn't just hush money anymore.

It actually meant something to both of them now.

"Look at us… getting along…" she contemplated gently. "We were so ready to destroy each other, weren't we?"
James looked back at her for a moment as he absorbed her casual comment. Yes they were ready for a war… but it was closer and far more ruthless than she would ever have expected. He would have done everything in his power to destroy her.

"Yeah… classic us…" he returned sardonically as he gestured for her to follow her back to his car.

The two of them walked in silence for a bit. James silently wracked his mind for employment opportunities for Sera. One kept coming back again and again. The Two Whales - that small diner downtown. He imagined he probably had a lot of pull with the head waitress of the establishment these days.

He'd have to speak to Sera first about not letting slip just who her biological daughter actually was; but Sera would probably be fine with that for the time being if she was serious about making these changes.

"So… I have a question…" Sera spoke again, breaking him from his contemplation.

James looked to Sera. She seemed confused, and strangely… amused.

"Okay, so who in the hell is that girl Rachel got on one knee for in front of an entire audience for? Because of that wasn't any sort of Shakespeare that I remember…" she asked James. "Is… is Rachel… well… Is she?"

James looked at her with widened eyes. Sera had been to see The Tempest? She actually saw the tantamount of a proposal issued by Rachel, with the agreed intention to flee Arcadia Bay soon? That had been easily the most confusing thing he had seen in quite some time, at least until this morning when he found his daughter voluntarily assaulted by Chloe Price…

James emitted an audible groan and shook his head.

"God, I don't know. She's Rachel… until she says something definitive… I'm just not going to assume anything," he spoke to the biological mother of his child plainly. "I'll try to explain the Price girl to you. I guess you're… going to have to deal with her quite a bit from here on out as well…"

James step walked, leaving poor Sera even more confused than before.

Chapter End Notes

This story is coming very fast. I'm actually sort of having fun. I'm going to do these one scene chapters every so after. They're nice little transitory bits that can be quickly crafted.

Next Chapter: Rachel has plenty of awkward conversations. None of them easy.

Thank you for reading!
Objectively speaking, wearing Chloe's clothing was probably not the finest example of Rachel's decision making abilities.

In a matter of a few short hours, she was officially back at the top of the rumour mill of Blackwell. Now, this was not a new thing for her to experience. Her... *popularity* meant she would draw the attention and ire of her fellow students who did not know her, and usually did not even attempt to know her. They based their rumours on the assumptions half-truths they heard, and in turn they spread their own rumours based on this. At this point she had a running list of titles. The latest being *dyke*, but the classics were easily *whore, anorexic, manipulative, teacher's pet, little miss perfect*...

It might have been hard to believe, but that last one actually hurt the most...

All of these titles were false, but would never be shaken from her reputation for the duration of her stay at Blackwell. All she could do was carry on and pretend like none if it bothered her, even though she was bugged by them. Even if more than once she ended up hiding in the bathroom, at home or school crying as she tried to swallow all the shit she dealt with back to a supressed state. The only way she could survive this constant torment was to pretend to be things she wasn't.

It was probably one of the reasons why things between her and Chloe had jumped leaps and bounds beyond her original envisioning of their friendship. Chloe didn't just give a shit about all the titles and rumours she undoubtedly heard about her. Chloe had helped her overcome so much of the bullshit she was hung up on. She had someone at her side who gave zero fucks about anything, and for the first time in her life, Rachel had felt unrestrained by the expectations.

For the first time in very long time, she was finally free to just be herself.

Stepping out of math class, she paused only long enough to wave and smile to Justin, who was red eyed and squinting as he seemed to be looking for his skate group. If he was less stoned, he'd have noticed Trevor was just across the hall from him trying to wave him down.

She started to walk, her hand running through her fucking awful hair. She ignored the looks she got to the best of her ability. She was so over today.

"Rachel, hey! How are you doing?!!" a bubbly voice called behind her

Rachel slowed down as Dana's huge strides blew by her. For a girl of her height, she was extraordinarily graceful as she seamlessly transitioned to walking backwards.

There were few people in Blackwell, whom Rachel held any sort of real attachment for. Dana Ward was one of those few people. More than once she had gotten Rachel through a crying session in their junior year, and for that Rachel never forgot it or her. She could be a little... well... bubbly, but it was a quirk that she was happy to live with. In spite of her friendship with Juliet Watson, she was probably the only other person she'd trust with the knowledge of Sera Gearhardt to.

For now, however, it was just nice that at least one other female student at Blackwell didn't
actively harbor ill will towards her. Well, except for Steph Gingrich; but judging from this
morning, there might have been motivation why.

Inwardly, Rachel couldn't help but find it adorable to have seen the reaction Chloe tried to hide this
morning from her; it was as though Steph had for a moment become competition. She had dealt
with the rivalry before, but for the first time in her life, it was from someone who actually
mattered...

"Hello Dana, I'm fine," Rachel returned as she drained those thoughts out of her mind. "You were
wonderful on Saturday, by the way. I am sorry I left so soon after the performance."

Dana flashed Rachel a radiate smile.

"Chloe sounded serious in her texts that night," Dana informed her. "I tried to call you about the
after party, and got a hold of her after the tenth time. I hope everything was alright."

Rachel nodded immediately. She wondered briefly why Chloe hadn't told her about, but she
supposed she wouldn't have cared, and with everything that had happened, how heavy it had gotten
that night between them as they tried to push away the inevitable world shaking consequences of
Sera Gearhardt existence. Parties for plays had been forgotten.

"Oh yes, it was fine," she lied, feeling actually bad for doing so to Dana. "Chloe and I were just…
hanging out."

Dana stopped moving, forcing Rachel to a stop least she collided into the tall girl. She eyed Rachel,
like she had just known that was a pile of shit.

"Yeah… okay…" Dana teased, her mouth half smirking as she placed her thumbs in her jeans.
"Because all of this is something that happens when two friends hang out," her hand gesturing to
Rachel's neck. "They wear their friends clothing and bite each other. That's totally a besties thing,
right?"

Pressing her hand to her neck and willing herself not to blush, Rachel remained silent for a moment.
What was she supposed to say here?

If she denied it, not only would it dig her into the rumour pit deeper, but it would feel like a
fundamental betrayal to the absent Chloe. Like, she was ashamed to admit that something special
was brewing between the two of them which they were exploring as they built on their connection.
But if she were to confirm Dana's suspicions, all she would be doing was potentially opening up
questions she had been trying to avoid herself for the time.

"Chloe's… a real sweetheart," she gently murmured to the wide eyed cheerleader observing her
carefully. "Next party you throw, you should totally invite her and you'll see yourself. I think you
could end up friends with her as well."

"Nice idea," Dana agreed happily. "If you want me to vet your friend, you just had to ask. I'm
totally on it!"

Rachel cracked a small smile. She had to hand it to her persistence's. It would pay off one day, but
for it would have to wait. The two girls heard "Dana!" get called and found Taylor Christensen and
Juliet Watson calling her name. They both were trying not to stare at the sight of the disheveled
Rachel.

Dana rolled her eyes and giving Rachel a small hug, she pulled back and walked quickly to join the
other girls, all three of them collapsing into deep conversation.
As narcissistic as it might have seemed for her to assume it, it was still in all likelihood involving her.

Sighing, Rachel decided it was probably wise to text Chloe and see if she had got her badass scrap heap truck running so that she could get a ride. Last thing she wanted to fucking do right now was call her Dad for a ride. She'd call her mom… but then conversations would happen that she was still trying to wrap her mind around would start before she was ready.

The Amber family was all fucked up now, and the most unspoken aspect to it so far was easily her mother… or was it step mother? Adopted mother? This was such a shit show.

However this meeting with Mom today would go down, her Dad would be right about one thing at least: she would always be her mom. Sera would never be able to replace her.

As she dug through her school bag to look for her phone, she paused as she felt something thin and plastic that wasn't in there usually. Frowning, she removed both her phone and the foreign object. She found herself looking at a small plastic ziploc bag. Its contents were a lighter, three cigarettes and a folded up piece of paper.

Tilting her head, Rachel opened the bag and removed the folded piece of paper and found herself looking at chicken scratch writing.

*The Rachel Amber Blackhell Survival Kit*

*Directions:*

*Step one: Smoke often to deal with bullshit people*

*Step two: Fucking repeat.*

*-three guesses who*

*PS: It's Chloe not some random freak. they are totally safe to smoke*

*PSS: 70 percent sure*

Even with all the shit that was on her mind, she couldn't help but smile at the note. There scrawled in the corner of the note the words 'We shall fly beyond this isle - the corners of the world our mere prologue'.

Chloe Price, the sentimentalist.

She was too cute for her own good at times.

Her phone beeped in her pocket. Rachel felt that familiar flutter in her pit of her stomach as the thought of Chloe already messaging her so soon after school caught her off-guard. Four days in and they were already reading each other's thoughts.

She reached into her jeans and tapped the screen.

Rachel emitted a groan at the picture of the pixie haired blonde girl smiling on her screen. This was the last thing she needed right now.

*Oh for Fuck's sake...*

*Victoria Chase - Rachel Amber*
Squinting at the message for a moment, she looked up and found none other than Victoria Chase standing way the fuck down the hallway near the science labs. She looked… well beyond pissed. The only reason she was texting and not screaming at her was she was still jockeying herself as the leading girl of Blackwell, and no one ever got to that position by being a screaming, spastic mega bitch right out in open public. Cutthroat behavior was saved for the digital world.

If she was supposed to feel bad about Chloe swapping the tainted tea, then she must have missed the memo. Everything that happened to her was a long fucking time coming.

Looking back at the screen, Rachel smirked as she started to type. She supposed she could play along for the time being.

**You - Victoria Chase**

**You - how are you feeling?**

That… well, that was probably not the wisest icebreaker she could have used...

**Victoria Chase - Watch your fucking back.**

**Victoria Chase - You and that punk bitch Price are fucking done from now on.**

Rachel blinked and glanced up to see Victoria was burning a hole through her. That escalated quickly. She supposed that the fact Victoria Chase was lucky that she didn't shit herself while being that stoned on muscle relaxants was probably a primary motivation for the rage.

**You - I think you're greatly overestimating how much I actually give a shit.**

**Victoria Chase - You should.**

**Victoria Chase - I'll fucking destroy everything, you have you dyke bitch.**

**You - Who was the one who spiked the tea again?**

**You - You realize that's criminal right?**

She watched as Victoria's face contorted into an expression of guilt and shame, if only for the briefest of moments. Knowing that she had only a limited window before Victoria pressed, Rachel twisted the knife.

**You - Victoria**

**You - If you want to be pissed, be pissed at me**

**You - fuck all knows why**

**You - Leave Chloe out of it**

**You - She was protecting me**

**You - One day I hope that you find a friend like I found one in Chloe.**

**You - Someone who doesn't take you and your rising alpha bitch status at face value**

**You - someone you can be vulnerable with and know that your deepest fears can be safe with**
someone else so you don’t have to feel so alone all the time

You -  **Being the Queen of this school isn't going to make your loneliness go away**

You -  **But you can try, I guess. Good luck.**

Victoria seemed almost… petrified, her mouth was hanging open slightly as though Rachel had somehow pushed through the bitch barrier just enough to startle her confidence, as she had with the tea comment. Rachel knew Victoria very well. Victoria was easily something Rachel could have ended up being if she only thought about her life one year at a time.

She was not going to fucking peak in high school, like Victoria seemed all too willing to do if she didn't back the fuck up and stop playing the game.

Rachel exhaled and slung her bag back over her shoulder. That would have to be enough for today. She didn't have time for this schoolyard bullshit at all-

Her phone lit back up.

**Victoria Chase** -  fucking stop texting me at any time cunt.

**Victoria Chase** -  Go find your bull dyke and do whatever the fuck you dykes do.

**Victoria Chase** -  Teach the bitch to shave her pits

**Victoria Chase** -  be her weight spotter

**Victoria Chase** -  whatever

**Victoria Chase** -  This school is mine now

**Victoria Chase** -  Thanks for destroying yourself for me, you grimy dumb bitch

**Victoria Chase** -  K love you bye!

Rachel pocketed her phone and exhaled. As she had to pass by Victoria to, she bit the bullet and with her head held high, she stepped forward towards Victoria, who remained still, her armed clenching her books as she glared at the girl who had played a role in humiliating her on Saturday in front of the entire drama club.

With very little difficulty on her part, Rachel forced a bright smile for Victoria and gave her a wave.

"Hey! Have a good day, Victoria!" she greeted the total fucking cunt with as much of her malice for the girl channeled into a warm and friendly tone.

Victoria returned the smile with one just as horrifically fake and forced as her own.

"Oh you too, Rachel!" Victoria spoke just as sunnily and just as loud back. "Say hello to your expelled girlfriend for me! You know, she’s so **cute** for a gangly, butch, poor person!"

The immediate vicinity surrounding Victoria was composed primarily of Jocks and cheerleader; all of them members or prospective members of the Vortex Club, and all of them very much curious to hear Victoria’s opinion on the subject of Rachel Amber and Chloe Price. Next to her was Courtney Wagner, who was trying not to laugh at Rachel’s expense.
Inside the group of Cheerleaders were Dana and Juliet, both of them looking like this was the last place either of them wanted to be.

Ignoring the urge to punch her in the mouth for slandering her friend, Rachel instead widened her smile. She stepped forward and clutched onto Victoria's shoulder.

"She is a keeper, I'll make sure to collect my bet from her," Rachel returned, unblinking as she spoke with a voice she only reserved for stage. "I know she won't be happy, but personally I think it's so good of you that you didn't actually shit yourself in front of Drama Club on Saturday night. Boy... that would have been reeeally embarrassing!"

Patting the mortified Victoria's arm gently as the gathering broke down into laughter; Rachel stepped back and pushed her way to the exit. Right now she was very grateful for Chloe's care package.

...

...

**Chloe** - *runnin late. Went 2 the 2 whales to tell mom.*

**Chloe** - *Shes flipped shit excited*

**Chloe** - *b there in 15min k?*

**You** - *Not a problem. Mom pride is the worst. Mom everything is the worst, really.*

Sitting next to the Blackwell swimming center, and inhaling a mouthful of smoke as saw Chloe do many times, Rachel choked and silently cursed herself for being too prideful to ask Chloe how to smoke.

It seemed so simple; fucking breathe in and out, but even after last night, it still felt like she was breathing in fire every fucking time. And probably the worst part of it was that Chloe probably knew exactly she was screwing up, but wasn't saying anything just to be polite. Maybe it was a private joke, the clever, lovable bitch.

For now she was just going to have to trial and error. After Victoria more or less forced a sort of abdication on Rachel's position, all she wanted to do now was just get out of here. Under any other circumstances, she would be able to deal with the shit that was Victoria Chase. She had been doing it for a long time now, but that was before all of this was dumped on her.

Silently, Rachel watched as Nathan Prescott walked by her. He did not spare her more than a glance. He seemed focus on the small girl sitting under a tree. She believed her name was... was it Samantha? Whatever it was, she was seemed like a genuine cutie as she looked up and scooted over so that Nathan could join her.

*Good for him* Rachel thought. It was nice to see Nathan trying to step out of the shadow of his father's expectations. Maybe it would help bring him out of that winded up state he was always in. He needed all the help he could get, and if this Samantha girl could play a part, then she fully supported it.

Taking another drag, Rachel stood up and slung her bag over her shoulder. She'd re-situate herself in the parking lot. That way Chloe didn't have to do a lot of waiting, and they could continue their
day together. Fuck, it was hard it believe it was still only Monday.

The feelings of the past few days were creeping back into her thoughts again, eroding her motivation to do the basic things she wanted to do with Chloe: Fix up that shack, play table top with Steph and the North's, see Chloe's inherent dorkiness flourish…

It just felt… wrong to want to do simple things when so much was left unsaid. Mom needed to know that she loved her, Sera needed to how fucking angry she was that she wasn't good enough to be her daughter. That the drugs had precedence over her up until a year ago, and a year ago wasn't a lot of fucking time. Her Dad had been the focus of her rage for so long, that she hadn't really put a lot of thought what she would say to her biological mother; because as much as she was mad at him, she was madder at her.

Dad was a piece of shit for lying, but at least he had had his reasons, and Sera was a total piece of shit as well for not even trying until now.

"Hey Rachel," a masculine voice spoke behind her. "Can I talk to you?"

Quickly wiping her eyes, Rachel rounded back and found the last person she wanted to deal with right this moment. Victoria Chase she knew how to handle, Eliot Hampden, however, remained a total mystery, except for one primary motivation she knew and absolutely hated the boy for having.

He wanted Chloe for himself.

She wasn't sure still why that was so infuriating, but as Chloe had been with Steph, so too was Rachel was with this Eliot, but this was something altogether different. Chloe knew how to control her feelings, but with Eliot, Rachel could feel her control slipping through her fingers. Perhaps it was because it was a different thing altogether. Steph was only a potential problem in Chloe's eyes, and Steph seemed to understand and respect the boundaries of others, even if she was nursing a crush.

Eliot was a long standing problem to her and had no understanding of boundaries.

Months now as she worked up the nerve to approach Price, she had seen the boy clinging onto Chloe like they were something official. It was made all that much worst by just how clearly uncomfortable Chloe was to be around him. Like... she thought that she had no one else and just had to settle on him hanging off her every move.

For the longest time, she had sort of felt this awkward mixture of surging anger, and sadness for the boy. He got Chloe, but he never got Chloe.

"Eliot… right… what can I do you for?" Rachel spoke, her resting bitch face mode activated as she continued to walk.

"Have a good time with Chloe last night?" he asked her, without missing a beat. "Or was it the whole weekend by the looks of it… might need to get a tetanus shot."

Rachel remained locked in silence as Eliot gestured to the mark on her neck. She didn't like the implications he was making. Like he thought that all they did the whole time was fuck or something. She especially didn't like the fact that he had sounded personally offended by it, and was attempting to mask his contempt for her with light humor. Like he thought it was cute or something.

"Hey, I'm sorry for this morning," Eliot continued, sounding like it had been rehearsed instead of
holding a genuine desire to reconcile. "I was just hoping to talk to Chloe, didn't mean to be strange or disruptive or anything. Your Dad is pretty hardcore protective though."

Rachel nodded, her lips curling into a small smile in spite of the company. Watching her Dad stand there and blow this kid off like he was flicking away a bug was definitely a high light to her day. As mad as she was, she was grateful that he was so quick to intercede and protect Chloe. More people needed to protect Chloe more often. She deserved that.

If it was genuine, if Dad actually wanted to stand by Chloe…then perhaps that would go a long way towards their reconciliation... eventual reconciliation.

"Yeah, that sort of comes with being a District Attorney seeing a young teen girl get that uncomfortable," Rachel spoke, forcing her annoyance out of her voice. "What is that you want to talk to Chloe about? I'll relay it for you."

Next to her, Eliot sort of shrugged. Telling her was clearly the last thing he wanted to do.

"Just a few things," he said as casually as he could."She's… blowing off my texts."

Rachel eyed him for a moment before she brought her emergency cigarette to her lips. What a real fucking shock right there, a real headscratcher why she'd do something like that. If Chloe Price was ghosting him, then something wrong had to be happening on his end.

"Just a few things..." she repeated as she stepped down the stairs to the parking lot proper. "I take it I'm involved in that just a few things?"

Eliot jumped down two steps, and stepped out in front of Rachel, making her come to a full stop only half an arm's length in front of him. It was much too close for comfort.

"Sort of; you can't deny this is all strange," he argued, a smile which never met his eyes crossing onto his mouth. "You just dropping right in front of Chloe, inserting yourself into her life like you always belonged. Her just… eating up everything you say without questioning it… doing all that you say. It's … weird that you took an interest in her."

Rachel narrowed her eyes up at the boy, her fingers tapping her cigarette.

"This might come as a surprise, but Chloe is allowed to choose who she wants to hang out with. She's allowed to have friends you know," she snapped back at him, losing any politeness she was trying to maintain.

If the boy wanted a war against, he would get it.

"Yeah, and friends are great, but not in the way you're trying to be friends with her," he returned. "She doesn't belong to you as your latest plaything."

"And… what… she belongs to you?" Rachel said, unable to keep herself from laughing at the madness of them. "She's her own person, allowed to make her own choices. Why the fuck do I need to explain such a basic concept to you?"

Taking one last drag of her cigarette, Rachel dropped the cigarette between the two of them, and inadvertently swallowed the mouthful of smoke. Her eyes watered as she felt sick, but she refused to acknowledge her fuck-up.

"Eliot, do yourself a huge favour and take a hint… I don't think she likes you in the way you like her," she got out through her queasiness. "I think that… whatever you had with her was nice for
you, but maybe not what she wanted. If she wants to be your friend, that is up to her, but Chloe Price is moving on, and maybe you should follow her example, now… if you'll excuse me…”

While she was done, Eliot wasn't. As she tried to blow by him, Eliot reached out and grabbed Rachel by the risk. He turned in place, almost pinning her against the cement wall.

The two of them were silent. Eliot's expression was empty as he stared frightfully hard at Rachel. Rachel, on the other hand, felt a current of fear as the grip on her wrist seemed to slowly tighten. She did not give voice to her fear. She was far too proud for that.

"Chloe doesn't deserve the humiliation of your eventual boredom," Eliot stated, unblinking as he held her wrist over her head "Please… go back to your own little world before someone gets hurt…”

Rachel exhaled unsteadily as the adrenaline started coursing through her body. Her expression contorted into rage. Tilting her head, she leaned in closer until they were almost touching noses.

"I'm going to tell you this once: get your fucking hand off me Eliot" Rachel growled lowly back, her body shaking with her open fury. "Walk away now and pretend we don't know each other from now on. And if you ever come around Chloe again without her expressed approval, I'll make sure that whatever you think you're going to put in Chloe will probably never work again."

The rumbling of a truck screeching to halt behind them averted the response Eliot was going to have to the threat. Rachel looked up and nearly sighed in relief of the sight of the rusty yellow shitheap truck that had screeched to a halt right onto the curb. The door flew open and out climbed an extremely filthy looking Chloe Price, fresh from another round of truck maintenance.

The anger in Chloe's face was easiest the hottest expression Rachel had ever seen in her life.

"The fuck is going on here?" Chloe all but roared at Eliot.

With a short stride, Chloe maneuverer herself in between Rachel and Eliot; her hand gripping the front of Eliot's shirt as Eliot had Rachel's wrist. With her free hand, she pushed back Rachel enough just in case a fight broke out between the two taller former… whatever they were.

"Eliot was just leaving, right?" Rachel spoke to Chloe, still staring up at Eliot defiantly.

Eliot did not answer her. He looked at Chloe with a faint smile, like none of this was particularly wrong. He just seemed… happy to have Chloe in such close vicinity as him. It took all Rachel's efforts not to go violent. She was not about to risk Chloe's return to Blackwell over this fucking asshole. No matter how much she wanted to kick his head in.

"Let go of her, rightfucking now…” Chloe spoke again, her voice shaking as she continued to shield Rachel.

Eliot held firm for only a short while longer before he slowly released his hand off Rachel's wrist. Rachel stepped back, rubbing her bruising wrist, but Chloe remained still, her body still shield Rachel from Eliot's line of sight.

Not that Rachel mattered anymore to Eliot. He had gotten the attention of the only person that seemed to matter to him.

"She's a lie, Chloe, and that's all she will ever be for you: a lie," Eliot replied. "Its nice feeling, but she's just here to toy with you until she gets bored and finds something new. Someone else who'll further her agenda. All you are to her right now is her vicarious rebellion. She'll get bored of it
sooner than you think."

The words were a lashing that actually hurt Rachel to hear. Eliot had swallowed all the stories about her, and added a new dimension. That she was some sort of parasite, who would latch onto others for her own survival. That wasn't who she was at all. That was the last she would ever want to be for anyone... especially for Chloe.

"She'll hurt you in ways you cannot begin to imagine," Eliot continued on, like he was trapped in a daze. "It's not even her fault; it's just in her nature to destroy others…"

Rachel shook her head in furious, but futile denial. She knew the boy would never sway.

"You don't know a goddamn thing about me…" Rachel breathed quietly.

Thankfully for her, it seemed as though Chloe wasn't buying that. Looking at Eliot like he had lost his mind, Chloe released her hold on Eliot's shirt. She stepped back; her hand reaching back in Rachel's direction. Rachel took it gratefully and squeezed it with both of hers. She tried pulling Chloe back to the truck, to no avail. Chloe had planted herself in place like she was ready for a fight.

"Dude, I don't know what exactly you think we are, but I know for fucking certain I'm not your girlfriend, and I don't need you saving me," Chloe informed the boy, before she turned back and added. "Rachel, forget him. Get in the truck."

Ignoring the tinge in her stomach at the soft, but commanding tone Chloe possessed, Rachel nodded and released her hands off Chloe's; she stepped back slowly until she bumped into the side of the truck.

"I forgive you, Chloe," Rachel heard the bastard say as she climbed inside. "I get it's hard to see anything but her… When you wake up and see her for what she is… I'll be here for you."

Chloe took another step forward, her finger pointing Eliot in the chest.

"Eliot, I'll make this clear: we are so fucking done in every fucking way that matters," she heard Chloe reply. "You were a friend… but that's fucking over now."

Chloe retracted her finger and stormed around to the driver's side as Rachel slammed her own door shut. She could see Chloe's eyes were full of tears. She refused to acknowledge Eliot as he stood there motionlessly watching as Chloe revved the truck back to life and pulled it out of the Blackwell Academy parking lot and sped off.

The two of them remained silent for a while, their encounter with Eliot still in the forefront of their thoughts. They both knew it would be awkward bad, but they hadn't expected it to be that borderline stalker bad. Maybe it was time to get her Dad officially involved. She really didn't want to go to him. She was trying to cut herself off from the temptation of running to Daddy the moments things got hard.

All that she knew for certain was that they definitely would have to do that if they had another incident. Maybe Eliot was just having a bad fucking day like she was. She didn't know a damn thing about the boy to know if that sort of intensity was a commonplace.

She would have asked Chloe, but as came to a red light, she looked and found Chloe still threatening to cry. Exhaling, Chloe turned to face Rachel. She was bleary eyed and physically shaking. Still, she refused to cry, like it would be a weakness she wasn't allowed to have... or show.
"I'm so sorry about all of this," she struggled to speak, rubbing her eyes furiously. "Eliot… fuck, he was a strange circumstance. I was mad and alone… Eliot was nice to me. My Dad… he just died, and I thought that it was just something girls ended up doing… pairing off with boys and just moving the fuck on. I … never understood why I didn't like him, like the others. Then there was you… and… And I didn't think he was… this… I don't know what…"

Unable to find words, Rachel instead looked up at the devastated looking Chloe. She gave her a small smile and tapped her forehead. It was enough to get a laugh from her. Chloe sort of snorted and thankfully got the hint. She leaned forward and pressed her lips against Rachel's forehead.

Smiling slightly wider at the small affection that made her feel so much better, Rachel pushed her head into Chloe's side; her hand squeezed Chloe's tighter. They would have to solve this Eliot problem as soon as they could.

If it were up to her, she'd bury the bastard in the junkyard.

Chapter End Notes

I wish I could make Eliot likable, but I can't. He was doomed from the start.

Another chapter down, this is basically an introduction section to the story at large. I'm thinking it'll be concluded at 10 to 12 chapters before we jump to Max.

Disclaimer: Victoria Chase is not for bullying. She is for tender loving and a gentle stripping of her barriers. Right now for plot sake I must be mean though. I am sorry. But I got the perfect person for turning her around.

Next Chapter: Rachel and Rose have a heart to heart and Chloe finds out she's not going to be able to hide from a Dad's prodding just because she's a girl.
The eventual arrival to the Amber home was a quiet one for Chloe and Rachel.

With the Eliot encounter weighing heavily on their minds, both girls decided to cancel their Junkyard time and made their visit to Mikey North a short one. They blew off the role play session for later, much to Steph and Mikey's disappointment (and her own, to be honest), but telling them that they had to deal with parental bullshit was enough to convince them to reschedule for the following week.

By the time the two girls got to the home, they had noticed Mr. Amber's car was already waiting for them. Judging from Rachel's frown, that must have been relatively peculiar for him to be home this early. Deciding it wasn't a good idea to block either of the Amber vehicles; Chloe pulled over on the curve and turned the engine off, and together the two of them sat in complete silence without the noise of the Engine disturbing their quiet.

Neither of them spoke, their only movements were to remove their seatbelts off them as they continued their unspoken tension. As she stretched out, Chloe glanced to her friend who was staring at crooning bobble head. There seemed to be a mixture of humiliation and resignation that remained fixed since the Eliot incident.

She was waiting for Rachel to make a move first, but it was obvious Rachel was far too fearful to enter her home right away. She couldn't blame her for feeling that way; she could only imagine the surrealism of finding out her Mom wasn't actually her Mom, and then having to come home and face down this reality after spending so long trying to avoid it.

As much shit as she put on her Mom, Chloe could never be able to imagine a world where that basic knowledge was suddenly wiped out.

Chloe blinked and looked down as she found Rachel's hand rest on top of hers. She opened them and allowed her fingers into the spaces left behind. Still Rachel remained motionless as she continued to stare ahead, even as Chloe gently squeezed the digits.

"What a strange…fucking day…” Chloe broke the silence between the two of them.

It was enough to elicit a small nod from the other girl in acknowledgement.

"Tell me about it," Rachel finally spoke, her tone weak as she rested her head on the back of the seat. "I handed everything over to Victoria Chase and the whole school thinks I'm gay for you now…”

Chloe arched her brow at Rachel's casual statement. Rachel went to school decked out in her clothing and somehow was surprised to have garnered that sort of response. She had been hoping James' assessment of Rachel had been false, but it was growing realer with every passing moment they were together. Rachel didn't think before she jumped into situations.

As for Victoria Chase... well… fuck her. Even if she was ordained the future of Blackwell, that wouldn't be the end Rachel's popularity. If anything, Bitchtoria would be ruling the school without
any teeth. The school would still love Rachel regardless, and Rachel would come to see this soon. And if that wasn't the case, well Chloe would be back in school next year ready to crack dissenter's heads and put her fucking Queen of Blackwell back on top, old school regicide style.

"What?" Chloe's sarcastic tone called back to her. "Wait a second, you aren't gay for me?"

Rachel looked over to Chloe, her eyes examining Chloe in a way that made her shiver and left her shy. It was sort of like Rachel was appreciating the sight of some plain looking girl sitting next to her. The way those softened hazel eyes were looking at her… there was still a very large part of her that felt... unworthy to be the focus of this sort of attention.

She knew it was a stupid thing to feel, and if she voiced it, Rachel would smack her around for being this way, but that didn't just erase the uneasiness she felt.

"I don't know what I am… I don't want who I'm attracted to be my identity… like I need a label to hide behind...if that makes sense," Rachel said as she lingered on the other girl. "But… yeah… I may be a little gay for you… you've been making it pretty hard not to be, to be honest."

As Chloe's face heated up, the two girls broke down into their first laugh together since this morning. It was a nice feeling that in spite of all of this, the two of them could still do that. Rachel shuffled a little closer to her, their thighs touching as she rested both of their hands on her lap. It was comfortable, it was sweet, and Chloe hated that she felt obligated that she had to ruin the peace.

"Do you think we should tell your Dad?" Chloe asked her, carefully stepping into the minefield. "I mean… about Eliot… he hurt you."

The softness in Rachel's eyes vanished in half a second. She turned away from Chloe, her eyes narrowed into a glare that stated very clearly, she wasn't interested in the conversation; but like it or not, they were going to have the discussion. This wasn't the Sera situation where Rachel led; this involved both of them. They would have to come to an agreement on where this had to go together.

"No he didn't," Rachel muttered mutinously, dismissing the concern like it was nothing. The frustration by Rachel's defiance to the truth was almost unendurable. Chloe raised Rachel's hand and turned it around to reveal the purpling bruise forming on her arm. Rachel looked at it causally, but did not seem interested in it.

"That's a fucking bruise, Rachel," Chloe reminded her, putting a commanding tone back to work. "We need to tell someone about this."

Rachel yanked her hand back and laid it flat on her lap again so that the mark was covered back up.

"Fuck that," she snapped right back. "I'm not scared of him, and I refuse to give him the impression I am by running off to Daddy because of a little bruising."

Rachel shifted her body around until she was properly facing Chloe. Her eyes narrowed at her as she reached out and took both of Chloe's hands.

"I know how close you are with my Dad now, and I understand why you are, and I think it's good that you're being a conduit between us; but if you have any trust in me, you won't get him involved," she requested, her voice softening as she held her intensive eyes on Chloe's. "If he does get involved, it's just going to make everything that much fucking worse… and I really can't deal with a worsening Eliot situation on top of Sera, and my Mom and Dad and all of this..."
Every instinct told her not to obey Rachel's request. She had promised James she would do her part in keeping Rachel safe, and yet here she was being asked to not to the very thing she swore she would do. But here she was, looking into Rachel's pleading eyes, and slowly, she exhaled and nodded curtly.

Eliot was shit… but maybe Rachel was right, and throwing a DA at the boy would only cause more problems than it solved.

At least Rachel appeared relieved. It meant that she didn't have to go to her Dad for help. The sort of thing Chloe would kill to have right about now.

"Well, again I'm sorry…" she murmured to Rachel, as shame washing back over her for her major role in this mess. "Like I said, it as a weird time for me, not knowing my place... but everything he said was… complete fucking bullshit."

Eliot Hampden… she actually liked him. Perhaps not quite in the same way as Eliot apparently liked her; but he was great fun. Enjoyed a good show, and was just a nice guy in general to her right up until Rachel entered her life. He was one of the few people in her life that didn't treat her like a total head case after Dad died. It was a nice feeling to have that feeling of normalcy, even if it never felt… quite right; and that wasn't a vibe she got from Eliot, but instead from herself…

Now, with all of this… she wondered how it was that she could have misjudged someone so terribly. She probably could have made things a little clearer, but his reaction so far was so fucking weird and went well beyond jealousy. He looked at Rachel like she was a mortal enemy, like she was evil or something, which was so far from the truth it would have been laughable if the bastard hadn't hurt her.

Chloe felt Rachel lean into her, her hand reaching out to cup her Cheek. Rachel's expression was ethereal as her fingers gently etched into her skin sending shocks through her body with only this small touch. No one should have had the power Rachel seemed to possess over her with something as simple as a touch.

"Eliot is hardly the first person to say these things about me," Rachel whispered to her. "He's just the first person to say these things to someone who actually matters to me."

Chloe eyes widened, as the words resonated in her. She wanted to get confirmation, she wanted to know if Rachel had actually meant that; but she was too much of a coward to form those words. So there she sat, staring into Rachel's steady gaze, her fingers now tracing along her jaw. She pulled her hand back and smiled slightly as she rested herself against the older girl.

"I'm not actively going out of my way to manipulate or deceive people for some greater goal," she continued on, her voice small and very uncertain. "I have spent so long learning to see through the bullshit of others from my Dad that it fucking freaks everyone into thinking I always have an agenda, and that I always know the right thing to say at the right moment. All I'm doing is paying attention to the things people say to me, or act around me. It's not some great conspiracy."

Chloe reached out and wrapped an arm around Rachel's waist, startling her slightly. She quickly relaxed, one hand touching against the intruding arm.

"I guess…" Chloe started, not wanting to fumble over herself. "I guess we're all so fake and alone and disconnected and so… lonely… that when someone is being genuine... it's… hard to contemplate it was anything other than an agenda."

Rachel squeezed her arm a little tighter. Although her back was turned, Chloe could detect the hint
"Kind of like you and being honest…" she murmured as she nestled into the nape of Chloe's neck. "Look at us… you can't tell a lie and I pay attention to the details. Quite the pair we make…"

Chloe shrugged, feeling Chloe move alongside her on her chest.

"I think it's kinda cool to have principals… I guess," she said, feeling hella stupid to say something like that.

Thankfully for her, Rachel didn't let Chloe's rare display of cheesy introspection slip.

"Well… that's because you're a total dork too," Rachel teased half-heartedly.

Chloe rolled her eyes. It took all her restraint not to find out if Rachel was ticklish.

"Damn, and here I was trying to be nice to you…" she muttered at Rachel "…fucking ball-busting bitch..."

The two of them broke back down into laughter at Chloe's mock outrage. As the laughter slowly subsided, Rachel again shifted in Chloe's arms, slowly rotating herself around until she was lying in her lap and facing up to her. She reached and lifted Chloe's arm. Her fingers gently touching the bracelet she had given her last night.

"Chloe, I didn't just give you this bracelet for the fuck of it," she breathed as she clutched onto Chloe's hand. "You're my friend - as fast as it might seem - you're my best friend, and I'm never fucking abandoning you ever, and I will never lie or trick or use you, because I'm not my Dad. I'm not Eliot, or Victoria, or anyone else. I just want to be me, and what I want to be is loyal to Chloe Fucking Price, just like you've been to me. The world can fucking distrust me all it likes, but I'm never leaving your side…"

Chloe reached out, her fingers cupping Rachel's cheek. Rachel emitted a sharp exhale as she looked into Chloe's eyes, like the only thing that seemed to matter to her and now was that her words had gotten through to Chloe. That she meant every word, and more importantly, that Chloe believed it.

But Chloe did believe them, and perhaps one of these days, Rachel would understand that didn't have to reiterate these promises over and over again, like she was afraid Chloe was going to just forget it. All of this showcased just how terribly insecure Rachel was. Years of lies, of high standards, of maintaining an image for everyone in her life had left her in a permanent state of fear. But that fear was so unnecessary when it came to Chloe, because Rachel had Chloe's implicit trust, and Chloe was never going to abandon her. She didn't need the affirmations, she didn't need the vows. Rachel had Chloe's love… in whatever way she wanted to interpret that, and no matter how things turned out between the two of them, she would have her love until the bitter end…

"Rachel… I'm touched… but that's kinda dramatic, even for you," she gently needled the girl in her arms, deciding to lighten the mood a little. "But… you know you convinced me days ago, right?"

Rachel huffed and choked back a small sob, her hand reaching out to cover Chloe's face and give it a small, playful push.

"You bitch... I was being serious…" she pouted as she rolled back to her original position. "And yeah, I'm dramatic… so fucking sue me, Price."

Chloe and Rachel lapsed back into silence, far more comfortable than before. With one arm tightly
wrapped around Rachel's waist, Chloe reached up with her free hand and pushed her hand against the back of her neck and worked them slow, methodological circles. She Rachel's body pulse at the touch, a sharp intake of oxygen on her part only encouraged Chloe's touch as she felt Rachel push herself backwards into her.

She wondered if Rachel knew how much of an inadvertent temptress she was. Chloe knew that she was not going out of her way to seduce her; but she couldn't deny how Rachel could take simple movements and raise Chloe to a state of near self-immolation. She wanted Rachel so fucking bad right now, but the delay was necessary.

Stupid fucking her for agreeing to them... if she knew Rachel could make her this vulnerable with just the simple things...

"Thank you for the emergency cigarettes..." she heard Rachel murmur to her. "Full disclosure, I'm... kind of new to smoking... well... new as in had my first cigarette yesterday..."

Thankful for the distraction, Chloe grinned inwardly. Yeah, she thought that was the case. It was kind of funny to watch Rachel turn pale at her first drag. Not that she would ever admit that.

"Plenty of time to practice..." Chloe spoke as casually as she could. "... Would you like to... I don't know... train your endurance...?"

Rachel emitted an extremely undignified snort, and if that had been Chloe's opinion, then it really was something to witness.

"You're shameless; anything to shove your tongue down my throat, hey?" Rachel teased her, her hand gripping Chloe's wrist.

Chloe replied by bumping her forehead into the back of Rachel's head, as the blonde reached behind her and held onto the back of Chloe's head, keeping the girl pressed against her, keeping them attached to each other's heads.

"Well... plenty of time for that if you're spending the night with me," Rachel breathed shifting against Chloe. "Can you just... just hold me right now?"

Chloe nodded, that was certainly something she could do.

...

...

It took a good forty-five minutes before Rachel had finally found it in her to withdraw from the safety of Chloe's arms and their shitheap truck; and in silence she led her friend towards the home that no longer felt like a home to her. For her, it was just another place that lied to her.

Perhaps Chloe was right, perhaps she was being dramatic, but could not deny that her home felt wrong... tainted... by the lie.

The wounds were still so raw, and it would probably remain so for a long time if Chloe's assessment was even half right. She had to get out of here, and the Campus of Blackwell felt like the perfect place to do that.

As she looked to Chloe, clutching her hand, she idly thought about seeing if Chloe would move on Campus as well when she was placed back in the school. They could be neighbours, and hang out
whenever the fuck they wanted. Chloe would probably smuggle a saw in and cut a nice little hole between the connecting rooms.

Okay maybe she wouldn't do that… Probably anyway...

There was another motivation to this desire as well, and that was the well-being of Chloe. She could only imagine the sort of loneliness which Chloe must have lived in: surrounded –trapped - by her past, alone in a home where her mother was in the midst of a new relationship with a man she clearly was uncomfortable with. David Madsen might not have been a bad person at the core, but even if he had been the most likeable person, Chloe would still mistrust him. The idea of a replacement must have been terrible to contemplate.

It was clear to her that in spite of this development, Chloe loved Joyce and would never stop loving her. But maybe it was better for all parties if Chloe got to stretch out her wings, to have a little freedom where she could just be herself instead having to shape herself to the expectations her mother and soon-to-be step father had. They were dead set on trying to make her just forget William, like his presence was a problem, and Chloe wasn't ready to give him up. If Joyce and by extension David, could not accept that, then there was no way Joyce and Chloe would find their even footing again.

For now it was just an idea she would run by Chloe. With her 'scholarship' it would ease the burden on her enough to rent a dorm… or perhaps she could double check it and see of the money would be able to cover the on campus living expenses as well as the tuition. She imagined it wouldn't take much to twist the donators arm for a definitive answer.

There was no sight of Mom as the two of them entered the home, but of course there was Dad, tapping away on his laptop. As the door closed, he looked to the two newcomers and closed the lid. He stood up and approached the two girls, making a point of not looking at Rachel's grasp on Chloe.

"Hello girls," Dad addressed the two of them, but maintaining his eyes on her. "Good day, I hope?"

She felt Chloe's hand tighten significantly at the question Dad had asked. Rachel glanced at the out of the corner her eyes to her. It was no secret that Chloe was on the verge of telling her Dad about Eliot Hampden, or at least really wanted to. Rachel jerked her arm and issued Chloe a silent plea to not do it.

None of this was missed by Dad, but he did not speak a word. He seemed to be coming to terms that he was going to have to oblige her desire not to spill to him at his beckoning.

"When do I see her?" Rachel addressed him, turning back to look him in the eye as before.

Dad blinked at the curt question. It was all she was willing to spare for him.

"She'll be here this Thursday at 6pm," he informed them. "I presume you will be joining us?"

The question was directed to Chloe. Chloe did not answer one way or another; she instead waited for Rachel to express whether or not she wanted the outsider involved in the family affairs any more than she already was. Dad got his answer the moment Rachel looked Chloe in the eye and nodded. There was no one she would rather be with for this.

Footsteps from the stairs caught Rachel's attention right away. Sure enough, Mom appeared on the final steps.

Mom was always an extremely put together woman, who did not wear her heart on her sleeve.
There was something very dignified about her, which Rachel had always sort of been in awe of. It was sort of like she was a blue blood, or some sort of noblewoman; but she was from a modest Midwestern family. It seemed like emotional responses were below her.

So to see her now, her eyes red from crying… she had been so strong the night of the revelation, but now between the new reality settling in, and Rachel's avoidance of her, it seemed to have finally broken through the barriers. Seeing her like this… was so much harder than she had ever thought.

"Rachel..." Mom spoke finally, her voice shaken as she took in the sight of her grimy daughter. "I'm so happy you're home..."

Washed in guilt for contributing to her Mom's state, Rachel glanced back Chloe for a moment before she let go of her hand and took several baby steps towards her Mom, who was off the stairs now and approaching her as well.

"I'm so sorry I've been avoiding you like this," she finally spoke, unable to hide her shame. "It's just been-"

Rachel did not get a chance to finish her words. Not when an overwhelming force of her Mom wrapping her into a tight hug pretty much silenced everything she wanted to say to her mom. From the anger of her complicity to the lie, to just telling her how much she loved her.

"An unbelievably difficult adjustment..." Mom finished for her. "It's okay to feel like this… I love you… we love you so much."

Rachel buried her head into her Mom's shoulder and squeezed back. She did not want anyone to see her cry.

"I've… been thinking about things I wanted to say to you for so long now, but I think the only thing that needs to be said is that you're my mom, you'll always be my Mom," she managed to get out, choking back the sob from out of her voice. "I want to meet Sera, and maybe we'll hit it off… but she'll never replace you; and I love you so much… so much."

Mom pushed her head up and removed her hands from her shoulders; but she remained locked in place by Rachel's grasp. She wasn't about to let go. Sniffling, Mom softly wiped her daughter's tears from off her cheek with a weak smile.

"I never would doubt that for a moment," she softly reassured the teen. "Having you… has been the greatest joy in my life. I've been so blessed to have you to myself."

With another burst of tears threatening to spill, Rachel buried her face again into her Mom and cling to her even tighter than before.

"Come on, Chloe..." Rachel heard her father mutter to Chloe. "Let's give them some space..."

For the first in a while, Rachel was grateful for her Dad as he led Chloe in the direction of his study. She needed this moment alone with the greatest woman in the world above all else right now.
Another chapter down. It was going to be a little longer, but in the spirit of quick update times I decided against that. Next chapter will be longer, and will probably take a few extra days, but we'll see.

Thanks for the continue support, It's very nice to have people who participate and take a genuine visible interest in your work.

Next Chapter: Sera and Rachel take their first steps together.
Sera Gearhardt was a very deliberate woman these days.

She had to be a deliberate woman. As a recovery addict, she needed structure above everything else. The chaos of unpredictability, to her, was probably the largest unknown which she had feared. For her, sustaining her sobriety meant that she had to keep everything organized; from her thoughts, right down to how she moved. After years of self-abuse, the last year was spent learning to be normal again, and learning to love herself again.

Something she had not anticipated was how much re-education actually went into the recovery process. Getting sober didn't just solve everything. It was a learning process. Basic things had to be retaught. Her voice, a weak, hollow shell of what she once had, had to be strengthened again so that there was life in her words. Her hand-eye coordination was awful, basic skills like handling utensils were a difficulty. She even had to teach herself how to walk again so that she didn't come off as a recovering addict zombie immediately in the eyes of others at first encounter.

These were little things many never paid much attention to, but for her, they were great personal victories.

…She absolutely hated that she had to take pride in it…

Another new aspect to her life was that she had everything planned out. She had back up plans if the original plans fail. Again, spontaneity was the biggest devil to the addict. At least that had been the case until Monday when James called her and more or less reinserted himself back into her life.

Now she was in a world where all her plans amounted to nothing.

In a single encounter with him, Sera had found herself becoming an official citizen of this sleepy little Oregon town. She had a very nice little two bedroom rental home now, and a job interview tomorrow morning at a diner called the 'Two Whales'. Apparently it was just a formality, the head waitress there was a friend to James or something. Nothing short of Sera shooting up in front of her interviewer would apparently lose her the opportunity.

James was so… very different then she remembered. Her sobriety had made her realize he wasn't the monster she had painted him to be.

For years, James had been the enemy; the man who somehow was the root cause of all her problems. Years she resented him, hated him for everything, from taking Rachel and running, to the money he sent. She absolutely hated being bought off; the money seemed to be like James contribution to fuelling her disease. Thanks to him, she never had to whore herself out like others she knew, never had to sleep on the street or go hungry to fuel the addiction. Every month her account had money, her addiction fuelled and James' life unimpeded upon.

With her sobriety came the cold reality. The money James was sending wasn't meant for the drugs, it was meant for her to just… live. She just co-opted the money's purpose to fit her narrative, and continued to use him as the reason for her suffering. He was a man, who still loved her, still wanted
to help her, but he was a father above all else, and had to place Rachel first.

Pride and good intentions had a funny way of keeping everyone in the dark.

Even with this knowledge at hand, there was still a small part of her that resented James for taking Rachel and leaving her; but this was the leftover selfishness of her old life. She was strong enough to ignore that, and she was self-aware enough to know that James still did not trust her in spite of his attempts to aid her in rebuilding her life, in giving her roots. It would be an extremely long time before she would be in a position where he could place any serious amount of trust in her.

While it was a mess still, for the first time in her life Sera felt brave enough to be ready to pay this much time to a cause.

If only she was brave enough to make the final steps to the Amber house.

Sera thought, she would be ready, but here she was struggling to make the final few yards up to the front door as the weight of abandonment really started to hit her. She could feel that little black tar stain calling to her as it did every other hour since her sobriety; calling her back into its safe, familiar arms.

It would be so easy to seek out Frank or Damon and get a hit right about now…

Exhaling, Sera dropped her cigarette and stepped out from across the street towards the house, past a beaten up old truck that was extremely out of place and onto the walkway to the front door. She felt as though she was in a trance as she approached the house. She made it to the front door and without giving her an opportunity to chicken out; she pressed her finger on the doorbell.

She didn't have to wait for long. Like on cue, the door opened and she found herself staring up at the tall imposing figure James held himself as. It took all her effort not to laugh as memories of them in the past flooded her thoughts. Gone were his grunge days, he had traded it in for a tucked in olive shirt and dress pants.

It was official, James Amber was old. He was in full Dad mode.

Sera absolutely fucking envied it.

"James… Hello…" she spoke to him, her voice a little shyer than she wanted it to come off as. Call it pride, but she did not want to show any sort of weakness around James.

James remained silent for a moment as he seemed to consider her; there was no trace of warmth was extended to her. It was painfully evident that he wasn't fan of this. It was one thing to be a little light hearted in a neutral place as he was on Monday, but here she was standing on his doorstep, officially entering his world now.

"Hello Sera," he returned after a moment. "How are you doing tonight?"

A small smile crossed on her face. She felt completely out of place.

"I'm doing well," she spoke, unable to hide her uncertainty. "Am I too early? I could… sorry, I could… come back another time…"

As she started to take a step back, James reached out and clasped his hand onto her shoulder. His expression seemed to soften slightly. Sera could see now she wasn't the only one affected with uncertainty. She could see the fear in James' eyes; fear of her. She had to remember that one good day together didn't constitute an end to the war, or even a ceasefire.
As much as this was reconciliation between Rachel and her, it went double for James and her. As much pain as she had inflicted on Rachel in the past few days since she learned her true heritage, she never knew the misery James endured in their final year together.

"I'm sorry, Sera. I'm being… defensive again… it's like I said about imprinted memories…” he confirmed her suspicions as he let go of her and stepped out of the doorway to allow her to come inside.

Exhaling, Sera nodded and summoned what was left of her courage to enter the home. Silently she took small steps, trailing behind James as she took in the well-kept and tastefully decorated (she supposed it was she wasn't exactly up snuff on these things) home which the Amber's called home.

As she turned her head she froze as she found herself looking at another woman standing there, her hands folded together in front of her as she wearily looked at Sera. She was wearing dark slacks and a cashmere sweater, a delicate string of pearls around her neck.

So… this was her… this was the woman who had stepped into repair the damage she had left in her wake.

"Rachel's in her room. I'll call her down in a bit," James addressed her, breaking Sera from her focus on the woman. "This is Rose, my wife. Rose, this is Sera…"

The unspoken phrase 'ex-wife' hung between the three of them. Rose hadn't moved, she hadn't even blinked yet as James looked at both women he stood between. Deciding to do him a favour for a change, Sera pushed her nerves to the back of her thought and smiled; she stepped forward towards Rose and extended her hand to the motionless woman.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Sera spoke to Rose. "Thank you so much for agreeing to this…"

Sera kept her hand outstretched as she watched Rose slowly soften her stance just enough to take the hand and briskly hold it for a moment before letting go. A new complication had presented itself, which Sera didn't want to cause, but knew better then to expect anything else. It was Rose's clear antipathy for her.

"Can I get you anything?" James spoke up to her, "We opened a bottle of wine…"

Rose and Sera simultaneously turned their heads to face the man who had just asked the recovering addict if she wanted alcohol. Although drinking wasn't her vice, even in the lowest throes of her addiction, Sera was committed to sobriety. Nothing stronger then caffeine and tobacco was going to enter her body from here on out… no matter how she would have killed for a joint and a drink.

"Right… sorry about that…" James apologized, his hand rubbing his neck. "Would you like a tea then?"

Sera smiled and nodded, doing her best not to notice Rose staring between the former spouses as though it were a private joke that she wasn't made aware of. With a final look to his wife… current wife, James disengaged from the two of them, heading to the kitchen to leave Rose and her alone with one another.

Rose stepped forward and held her hand out to the direction of the open living room.

"Care to take a seat?" she inquired, her voice carefully maintained.

Sera smiled again and in silence she followed Sera to the living room, and took a seat on the couch which Rosa gestured to her. Rose sat across from her, her hands folded in her lap as she maintained
an expression of resignation on her face. It was clear the only reason Rose was agreeing to any of this was because Rachel needed this.

Rose… Rose was a real mother. Not like her. As much as she envied James, it was nothing compared to how she felt for the woman across from her; the woman whom she still had to swallow her pride and submit herself to for her approval.

She could only imagine the level of loathing Rose must have felt for her presence here, interrupting her life and completely destroying the illusion Rachel held for her.

"I wanted to say thank you," she spoke, carefully speaking so that the heroin slur in her voice was pushed out. "Being there for James, being the Mother to Rachel that I could never be. I wanted you to know that I don't intend on causing you any sort of problems. I know what I am, and I know what I forfeited. If you are at all uncomfortable with this, let me know and I'll back off… it's understandable if you hate me for this-"

She was rambling, she knew it, James, who was probably listening from the kitchen, knew it, and Rose definitely knew it as she raised a single finger to silence her without another word.

Taking the hint immediately, Sera clamped her mouth shut and watched as Rose shifted in her seat. Rose looked extremely uncomfortable with all of this. It seemed to her like Rose was more than toying with taking Sera up on her suggestion about asking her to leave.

She watched as the mother pushed herself to the edge of her seat.

"I feel... a lot of things about all of this, and about you for everything you did in the past… but I don't hate you, Sera," Rose spoke delicately. "...how could I hate you, when you gave me Rachel?"

Ignoring the little black stain in the back of her mind, telling her that the words were false, that Rose was just going through the motions to avoid any sort of incident, Sera chose instead to believe that the words were sincere. That Rose and her were having a moment of understanding between them. She did know what to say.

Thankfully for her, James was by her side, a mug of tea in his hand; Darjeeling, lemon, one sugar. She smiled to him and accepted it, watching as James walked over to Rose's side, his hand touching his wife just behind her neck.

Rose glance up to her husband and issued him a smile that hadn't met her eyes. It was obvious that the situation between them was frayed by all of this. James had obviously confided to Rose about Sera, but Rose probably lived under the assumption she would never be placed in this sort of position; playing host to the heroin junkie and having to be nice about it. There was no denying that Rose still had all the horror stories James taught her, firmly stuck in her head.

Imprinted memories were a hell of a thing.

The three of them returned to silence. Sera spent it sipping her tea, her eyes travelling around the home. She paused and noticed sort of a trophy case, of which she assumed were a collection of Rachel's accolades. She would have to check it out after dinner if that was permissible. She was popular around Rachel's age, but she never was very interested in academic achievements. Not like James was.

If James was right and Rachel was a real combination of the two of them, then she was going to be a very dangerous girl indeed.
Sera was about halfway through her tea when she heard it. It was two pairs of feet stepping down the stairs. She watched as James and Rose cease their near silent chatter and looked in the direction of the stairs. Sera set her cup down on the coaster in front of her and stood up and turned around to silently gaze at what the Amber's were looking at.

Standing there sure enough were two girls. The first girl was standing a step in front of the other girl. She was taller, her hair fringe tinged with blue dye, one eye yellow and purplish from a blow to the eye she took. She was staring at Sera like she was a bodyguard.

This one was Chloe Price, the girl James told her about. She and Chloe had met once before, or rather encountered each other, locking eyes after she met up with Frank Bowers on Saturday.

She had wondered why the girl looked at her so significantly at the time, and now she knew why.

The second girl, who was clinging to Chloe's hand, was about a head shorter than the Price girl. She was a blonde hair, hazel eyes girl. She was dressed in a plain grey open front cardigan, white blouse and black slacks. She looked extremely uncomfortable being there, but Chloe leaned towards her and whispered something presumably encouraging. It was enough for her to step down the final stairs.

The fear that girl possessed did not phase Sera at all.

To her, Rachel Dawn Amber was like an angel.

Sera was not a particularly religious woman. Religion as more her Mother's game, and it wasn't in her recovery program; and even if she was religious, she'd have felt that God wouldn't have time to save a wretch like her. But that was what Rachel looked like to her: an angel and she dared anyone to challenge her on that.

While this was the first time they interacted, this was not the first time that she saw her (not that she'd admit it to James and Rose). She had seen Rachel a couple times over the past month; mostly around Arcadia Bay, at the Firewalk show, The Tempest performance, but always from a distance and never very long to arouse her suspicions.

These stolen glances sustained her as tried to get James to meet her about an official meeting. She would cherish the details she could notice. The single blue feather ear piercing, her smile; Sera felt her heart jumped out her chest when she first noticed Rachel was wearing the bracelet she had made her all those years ago. One of the last few things of her James was willing to hold onto and pass on to their child.

Sera's eyes flickered to her wrist. She wasn't wearing it anymore.

For a brief moment she wondered if it was because of her, but that was when she noticed it. The bracelet was now wrapped around Chloe Price's wrist instead. The girl noticed the attention to bracelet and turned a pale pink, her teeth jutting out to clamp on her lip.

Huh. That was something she was going to have to ask about.

She looked to Rachel and took a single step forward before she stopped herself. The movement earned her a small frown from James. It was a little too soon to be affectionate.

"Hello Rachel," she said, attempting to hide the shame building in her voice. "It's been… such a long time."

Rachel remained silent, quietly observing her biological mother with no small amount of
skepticism. Sera could not help but be reminded of James – a consummate observer – which left Sera that much more weary. There was something else, however, like… she seemed to be conflicted.

That could be very good or very bad.

"I don't... really know what to say to you," Rachel spoke finally, her voice delicate and uncertain. "I thought that I would… but I don't…"

Sera smiled, inclining her head in acknowledgment at just how overwhelming this all was. She tried to pay no attention to James and rose as they seemed to withdraw to a respectable distance, so that while they were observing, they weren't interfering. Sort of like prison guards during visiting hours.

"There's so much to talk about, that finding somewhere to start is impossible. I have had so much longer to think on these things then you have, and I still find it to be difficult," Sera returned, her hands fidgeting at her sides. "If you want to forgo the small talk… and if you're up for it, I was thinking that if you had things to ask - Anything at all - that I would answer you."

She fell silent, waiting on Rachel's judgment as she seemed to consider this. She still hadn't let go of her friend's hand. Chloe seemed to be the last comforter she possessed now.

"And how would I know you're telling the truth?" her daughter asked, her voice twisting out of the soft, shy voice she possessed as she seemed to find it in herself to add in the accusation.

Sera rolled her shoulders back and shrugged.

"You don't, you can't trust a single thing I do or say, but... for what little it is worth to you, I'll answer you honestly anyways. If you don't want to believe me, that's entirely fine..." Sera returned, attempting to hide the note of disappointment from her voice. She had expected it to be hard in theory, but practice was all the more difficult.

She glanced to James for a moment. He sort of nodded, which was encouraging. Having James' approval...That... had meant more to her then she had expected.

She turned back and saw Rachel disconnect from Chloe and quietly, she slumped down into the couch. She held her eyes ahead. She refused to direct her attention towards Sera.

"What... what did you hope to accomplish by seeing me now, after so long?" Rachel spoke, her words growing harder... more James-like.

Sera inched closer until she reached the other end of the couch. She took a seat, flattening out the hem of her dress as Rachel continued to stare ahead at the opposite wall, her eyes narrowed.

"I suppose I wanted to start the process of bringing closure to an era where I hurt the most people," she returned, her hands folding onto her lap.

Rachel directed her expression of frustrated annoyance to Sera directly. Realizing she was about to get hit on this, she pushed on.

"I'm not delusional enough to expect your forgiveness. That is not something I have the right to seek, it is yours alone to give," Sera pressed on, elaborating before Rachel got upset. "I... want to help you understand. I... just I will have to ask you to be a little patient if your question wants specifics... as you can probably imagine, my memories of the past beyond 2008ish are... difficult to remember."
She allowed a trace of humour to colour her words on that last part. Self-Deprecation was a survival tool in the face of judgement, and with Rachel sitting across from her, she had to utilize this coping skill. Judging from expression on Rachel's face – a look of revulsion – she wasn't having any of this at all.

"I suppose that's what happens when you spend your life as a fucking self-absorbed junkie, right?" she snapped back viciously.

It was almost like a slap across the face. As much as she anticipated the rage, it didn't hurt any less. Funnily enough it was Rose who seemed ready to come to her defense. Whether it was out of genuine concern, or the fact a guest had been insulted by her daughter in their home, Sera wasn't entirely certain. Whatever it was, she held up her hand to the real mother.

"I deserve that more then you will likely ever know..." she gently permitted the teenager.

Rachel rolled her eyes and launched herself out of her seat. She started pacing, looking as though she was going to snap. She paused though, her back turned to Sera and the rest of her family and her friend, her head hanging for a moment before she turned back to face Sera, who sat there in silence, ignoring the gut wrenching she felt at the sight of her child looking so... hurt by everything she was hearing.

It was difficult to think that this was only the start of it. If Rachel was willing to commit to a reconnection to her, she would only continue to be hurt by her biological mother for the foreseeable future. The stories Sera could tell, the pain she forced on her father. They had loved each other deeply, and for James to have killed their relationship to protect Rachel... that was a love Rachel needed to understand.

Sera felt nothing but utter hatred for herself right about now for all of this pain she could see her daughter was now going through because of her. She knew she had to do this, and it was the right thing to do; but that didn't stop her from hating herself for this mess she created and refused to fix until now.

"Did you think about me at all?" Rachel asked, her hand rubbing her neck as she finally looked at Sera again. "In the last thirteen fucking years before you got clean, was I even an afterthought? Or did the addiction come first?"

Sera remained silent for only a moment. In utter shame, Sera shook her head.

"The addiction came first. It came before everything else in my life," she admitted, unable to look into Rachel's inquisitive eyes. "I destroyed my marriage, I destroy my relationship with my parents, and worse I threw away my chance at having you as my child... all to sustain this craving. Heroin was my best friend, and my worst enemy. It killed everything I cherished, and yet it always somehow numbed that pain. It hurt too much to think about what I lost... and when I thought about you, in those rare moments... all it did was worsen the state I was in..."

Exhaling, Sera turned away.

"Heroin is... self-sustaining misery..." she commiserated.

"But what changed?" Rachel asked without missing a beat. "What made you decide that you needed to get clean and see me?"

And there it was... the golden question. The one question she didn't want to answer, but knew she would have to if she even wanted a chance at
"I overdosed a year and a half ago," she answered simply, biting the bullet. "I took a bad hit and I… well, I died for six minutes. The attending physician said that if it wasn't for a Good Samaritan who found me I'd have…"

Sera trailed off and nodded. She didn't really have to finish that sentence off for the people who were looking at her in a state of horror. Swallowing the knot in her throat the only face she looked at was James. He looked… visually upset by the information. Like in spite of everything… in spite of all of the shit she had put him through… he still sort of cared about her.

These were strange days for her to see that.

"I woke up in the hospital with my stomach pumped, shot up with Naloxone and sober for the first time in a very long time, and realized that I had no one," she continued in a monotone. "I would have died and had no one there for me, and I knew that was the last time I was going to use… The first months trying to clean were marked with failure… but then… the thought of you came back while I was cleaner then I was, and I knew then I needed to fight this."

Sera fell silent and focused her gaze back to examine Rachel staring at her wearily.

"So… all of this was entirely motivated by your own self-centeredness…" Rachel concluded. She looked so utterly disillusioned by all of this discussion.

Once again, Sera nodded.

"I'm a recovering heroin junkie, Rachel. Selfishness is in my nature," she reminded the girl, struggling to smile in the face of this. "This time that selfishness was, for the first time, constructive. I wanted to get clean, I wanted to pull myself out of this endless hell; and I wanted to one day stand before you like I'm doing now, having to answer for all the terrible things I did to the one person that I failed the most."

Rachel threw her hands up and backed away from Sera.

"Fine, you needed to be selfish to get better, good for fucking you," she growled at the older woman. "But do you see that woman?" she added, her hand gesturing to the silent Rose standing next to her husband with a mask of collected calm. "She's my mom, Sera. Not you."

Sera blinked; her mouth opening for only a moment before she closed it again as she watched Rachel took her place next to Rose.

"Just because you're here doesn't give you any right to replace her in any way," she continued, her voice growing higher. "She was there for me when she didn't have to be. She chose to marry my Dad and be Mom, and for thirteen years she lived with the truth to keep me from knowing anything else…"

Rachel trailed off. She turned away from Sera and focused on Rose instead. She reached out and gripped her arms.

"Mom, I was so mad about the lie, but I'm grateful you did that for me," Rachel spoke to Rose as though she was the only person in the room. "You taught me just about everything I know; and just because she's here now… it changes nothing at all."

Rachel's hands slid down Rose's arms. She turned back to face Sera, with an expression of regret. Like, she had to tell the truth, no matter how devastating it was.

"I'm sorry, Sera…" she murmured. "But you're nothing compared to my Mom…"
Silence returned in the household as everyone seemed to be waiting for her response in the face of this clear rejection. Sera forced a smile back onto her face yet again as she bit her bottom lip to keep it from visibly wobbling. Again, she had expected this, but the overwhelming sense of futility made it all that much worse.

"I know..." she spoke, straining her voice of any stray emotion. "I told your father about this first, and then I told Rose, and now I'm telling you. I have no intentions on luring you away from her, replacing her in any way. I just want to get to know you, and what our relationship is defined as is totally up to you."

Rose stepped out of Rachel's shadow and stood at her side, her arm wrapping around the girls shoulder. Rachel stiffened at the touch and looked up to her Mom. Rose smiled slightly, breaking her cool reserve which she had held since Sera entered her home.

"Rachel, this unfolded in a very... unpleasant way; I can appreciate your anger, and I love you so much for defending me," she gently tried to convey to her angered child. "But Sera trying to change and that's something to be commended. I am not threatened by Sera, and I trust you enough to be able to not just maintain a relationship me, but work something out with her, if that is what you want."

Rose trailed off for a moment as she looked to Sera properly. It was hard to believe it, but even after she had intruded into Rose's life, into her motherhood, it appeared as those she was still willing to give her a chance. Even in spite of a past that screamed she did not deserve that.

"She's... your mother as well," Rose spoke carefully. "It may not feel like it now, but she should have her chance to try and prove it to you."

A cough interjected over the two... technically three Amber women. They turned to find James was standing with Chloe Price, whose mouth was sort of scrunched up watching the three of them. It seemed to Sera that Chloe was preparing to intercede if it all fell apart.

"How about we have some dinner," James suggested tacitly. "We can continue this later, if you'd like."

Rachel, Rose and Sera glanced at each other for a moment before they silently came to an agreement. There was all the time in the world to debate whether or not Rachel had any sort of obligation to make nice with Sera. If there was an argument though, the Sera hoped it would happen on another day.

That way she knew she'd get a second opportunity to see her child. A desperate move... but she'd take it.

... 

Dinner was held in the living room instead of the dining room.

Rachel had apparently destroyed their dining table in a fit of rage, which sounded unbelievably nuts. Their new table was in the process of being crafted in Seattle, so Sera, the Ambers and Chloe Price ate their Gazpacho as carefully as they could.

While the Amber women and Sera had been silent, that was not the case between James and Chloe.
They were adamantly discussing that beaten up old truck that was ridiculously out of place in front of the Amber House. James didn't like to advertise who he was before he became a lawyer, but his father was a mechanic and that made James an amateur one by default.

Chloe seemed to be digesting everything James said and suggested. Sera silently wondered if it was genuine interest, a desire to be able to talk about something outside the elephant in the room, or that Chloe was attempting to win of the father of the girl she was… friends with, by… well, doing what James did for Sera's own father: kissing ass hard.

Whatever the case was (Sera was leaning towards theory number three), Chloe did attempt to bring Rachel in on the conversation, saying she played a part in getting the truck operational, which impressed James greatly.

Rachel didn't say single word.

It physically hurt to see Rachel's continued rejection of James. Even in the face of everything, the lie that had protected her had left her jaded that there seemed to be nothing James could do to erase the fact. After everything he had done for her in the past few days, Sera felt obligated to step in on his behalf. So, if Rachel decided one evening with Sera was enough, she'd bring it up. If Rachel decided to keep in contact, she would save it for another time. She did not want to stir up things too much if she had time to build something with her daughter.

For now she was sitting in the backyard of the Amber home, smoking a cigarette with an old mug as an improvised ashtray given to her by Rose. With the forest fire raging in plain sight, it was understandable why Rose would be concerned for this. Rose didn't seem to be the sort of woman who'd approve of smoking under any circumstances though.

The sliding door opened behind her, catching her attention. Standing in the frame briefly before stepping out onto the deck, closing the door behind her was Chloe Price. She smiled faintly to Sera, which Sera returned with one of her own. She watched in mild amusement as the girl forewent the comfortable seat and instead slumped down onto the steps.

Chloe reached into her jacket and produced her cigarettes and lighter and lit up. Sera ignored the natural instinct to chastise her, but she was in no position to do that. The only way she'd ever be able to do that would be if she caught Chloe and Rachel smoking Meth, Krokodil or Bath Salts. In the hierarchy of narcotic use, Heroin had long since lost top position of shame over those ones. Opioid abuse was just the American way these days…

Exhaling a plume of smoke as she realized how old she actually was, she held her eyes on Chloe, who was turned away from her as she smoked. She… seemed very sweet; very… attentive to Rachel. There was an underlying sadness about it though, but she did not draw attention to it. In these turbulent times, Rachel could not have asked for a better friend to see her through them. …or whatever they were…

Chloe shifted around somewhat, enough so that she could take in the silently smoking and observing biological mother of her friend (or was it girlfriend? Fuck, these girls were confusing) Sera smiled again as she took another drag.

"So…" Chloe spoke awkwardly. "Cool… tattoos…"

Sera glanced at her sleeve of flower tattoos with a small smile still etched in her face. She had gotten them in various states of heroin addiction over the years. Once marks of shame, they were now a reminder that she had somehow survived the self-imposed slow death she was ready to
"Thank you," Sera murmured as she tapped her cigarette into her mug. "Would it be much of a stretch to assume you're going to want to get some work done?"

A small grin formulated onto Chloe's face. She nodded.

"Yeah… been sort of designing a sleeve myself," Chloe admitted as she pulled her cigarette back from her mouth. "I'm going to wait another year so my Mom doesn't have a huge fucking freak out."

Sera folded her hands into her lap, a knowing smirk crossed onto her face.

"Good girl, better to be original about it then get something out of the tattooist's book," Sera praised the girl lightly. "If I see another girl with a Barbwire or butterfly tattoo, I might liable to kick someone's head in."

As Sera hoped that Chloe hadn't noticed the butterfly tattoo she openly wore, Chloe barked a laugh out at the sort of joking comment, which felt good. Getting that sort of response after this evening gave Sera a little hope for the future. It was sort of like getting Chloe to laugh meant she could get Rachel to laugh in some sort of convoluted way. Still... she could not help but feel a little... concerned. This was not the first time they had met, after all.

"Can I offer you a word of advice?" Sera spoke again, her voice shifting back to a formal state.

Sera watched as the good nature washed away from Chloe's expression. She looked almost weary in a way she had seen in Rose.

"Three hours into knowing her and you're offering advice to me?" Chloe asked as she too tapped her cigarette, but onto the step like a good punk girl.

"Not about Rachel," Sera spoke, unblinking as she stared into the soft blue eyes of Chloe Price. "It's advice for you."

Silently, Sera pushed herself out of her seat silently she walked closer to the girl, leaning against the railing as she breathed both another mouth of smoke and Chloe's as well.

"I understand the urge to get high. Being a teenager sucks, and I am in no position to deal out advice in that field," Sera spoke down to the still sitting girl. "But I do know Frank Bowers."

She watched as Chloe stiffened in her seat. Chloe looked up to Sera looming over her for only a moment longer before she too stood up and joined Sera. Resting her own back into the railing as she seemed to now be very attentive to what Sera had to say.

"My advice is this: Do not mix your life up with his. Buy your weed if you must, but keep out of his way," Sera warned the young girl. Her voice lowering as she watched James and Rose speaking inside the house. "He's not charming, or likeable. He's just a kinder face to worse men. I would rather you not risk yourself over him and by extension..."

Sera trailed off, leaving Rachel's name unspoken. She felt a little guilty, like she was only watching out for Chloe for Rachel's sake. She looked to Chloe, who seemed unbothered by this. Perhaps she was being too self-critical.

"I'll tell you what I told James: I'm never going to let Rachel get hurt…" Chloe murmured to Sera.
Sera actually believed that.

A small smile crossed back onto to Chloe's face as she looked back into the house. Sera looked and found Rachel had marched by her parents towards them. Silently, the girl stepped out of the house and joined Chloe and Sera. Sera straightened up and ignored the small build-up of jealousy as Rachel leaned up against Chloe.

"Can I have a drag, Chloe?" Rachel asked her friend, her hand extended out towards the girl's cigarette.

Chloe glanced to Sera for a moment almost as if she was not entirely comfortable with giving a cigarette to Rachel in front of her biological mother; but in the end she placed the cigarette in between the tips of Rachel's fingers and watched as the girl gently took small puffs. It was clear to Sera that Rachel was new to this, which sort of made her feel better about it.

As Rachel handed the cigarette back to Chloe, she gave the Price girl a soft smile and a pat on her face before she directed her attention to Sera properly.

"Dad said he'd drive you back to your place if you'd like," Rachel broke their silence. "It was nice to meet you…"

She trailed off, like she hadn't meant to say that so quickly.

"I'm… sorry back there for being such a bitch, if you thought that's what I was being…" she murmured, her smile vanishing before Sera's eyes. "But… it's just… I needed answers first... and you had to understand you couldn't just come into my life and just fucking interrupt it because you thought you're entitled to that, since you birthed me…. because that is so unfair."

Sera nodded, no matter how much it hurt, she could appreciate the stance Rachel had taken.

"You are right to be angry with me. I know… loyalty to family is important, and I promise you I'm not here to insert myself into your life without you having a say," Sera assured the girl, hiding the growing fear of rejection out of her words. "Whatever happens next is entirely in your hands. I'll be in Arcadia Bay and you can choose how you want to handle this."

Rachel crossed her arms over her chest and seemed to be in the process of considering it.

"I... don't know if I want to call you mom... I've having difficulties calling my Dad 'Dad' these days and he didn't run off on me," she admitted to Sera. "But… I would like to get to know you more. Would that be okay with you?"

Exhaling sharply, Sera rubbed her forehead as she nodded.

"I'll take it..." Sera agreed, setting her cigarette into the mug. "It's all I ever hoped to have with you."

Rachel reached out and stole the cigarette from Chloe's lips, earning a protesting 'What in the actual fuck, Amber!' from Chloe. She took another drag before she handed it back to the girl had stolen from.

Then Rachel did something Sera hadn't expected at all. Rachel stepped forward and launched herself into Sera, her arms tightening around her back, her hands reaching up to grip the older woman's shoulders as she buried her face into the shoulder of Sera's dress.

It took a full moment to process it. For a moment, Sera thought her mind was playing tricks on her,
like it was some sort of delusion she had; but it was real. She had her daughter in her arms for the first time in a decade and a half. Slowly, uncertainly, Sera moved her own arms up and wrapped them around her child as she stared ahead, as she attempted not to break down and scare off the girl clinging to her.

Through the glass door she could see James now, his hands in his pockets as he watched his daughter and ex-wife embrace. She did not know if he seemed happy or not, but what he felt did not even register to Sera.

All that mattered now was the girl in her arms.

The hug lasted only a few moments longer, but Sera relished in every second. As Rachel pulled back, it took all of her efforts to remember her place and release the teen girl out of her arms. Rachel stepped back, tucking her slightly frazzled blonde mane back behind her ear as she glanced briefly to Chloe.

"I just wanted to try that out at least once..." she admitted to Sera softly, stepping out of Sera's way so that she could join James for the ride home.

Sera smiled openly. It was probably the only thing holding back the tears.

"Of course, Rachel..." Sera said, using her daughter's name gratuitously, solely out of the desire to make up for all the time she spent never using her name in her daughter's presence. "But... if you're ever in the mood to hug me again... I really wouldn't hold it against you."

Deciding she had reached the high point of the evening and that anything else she would say would only ruin it; Sera silently stepped by her daughter and entered the Amber home. She took her place with James and only allowed herself part glance back to Rachel and Chloe before following James's lead to the front door. Rachel was clutching her hands on each of Chloe's arms and talking animatedly.

Was she... was she actually excited?

Whatever the case was, all Sera knew for sure was that this had to have been the best few moments of her life. She had her first taste of motherhood, and she was already hooked.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this. Sorry this took a little longer than usual(three days oh no. lol). Writing from Sera's perspective was new, and I have looked forward to it. With this down, and Sera now an established POV character her part will be written faster.

I got a question about Maximum Victory. 2-4 chapters before Max enters the picture.

Thanks you for all the kind comments. I like to send my thank yous to those who comment, but don't like to clutter my comment section with my comments. Is there a private messaging system here like on FF.Net? Let me know.

Next Chapter: Chloe and Rachel: Queens of the Junkyard.
June came faster the Chloe had anticipated.

With the first awkward meeting with Sera completed with a certain amount of success, it gave way to a decision made by James and Rose for Sera to meet with the Ambers twice a week. Chloe tried to make every visit, but she still had her own thing going on with an increasingly curious Joyce and the douchebag she was sleeping with.

This softening of the tension between James, Rose and Sera had also led to an increasingly more vibrant and outgoing Rachel. Like, she finally understood her place in everything after the truth came out. Each interaction with her birth mother seemed to explain little things she did that she didn't get from James or Rose.

As for Sera, Sera was… well… she was sad at her core. After all she did to others and herself, Chloe couldn't imagine anyone not being that filled with regret. Yet in spite of this, Sera did seem to be coming out of her self-imposed punishment; at least during her visits with Rachel. She'd try to keep the conversations current as much as possible, attentively hanging off every detail Rachel had of the day's events, no matter how mundane. She'd sort of inch forward, gently prodding into Rachel's youth as well to varying degrees of success. Rachel would usually indulge her, and Sera always seemed so… engaged, to digest what Rachel told her.

For her part, Sera was a little more hesitant. She had good reason, of course and she never refused a question Rachel asked her. It was just a much more painful experience to dive backwards. Rachel and Chloe both anticipated the discussion of Sera's self-imposed hell would be hard, but the good memories seemed especially difficult for the mother to convey. Like, thinking about all the love that she gave up voluntarily was incomprehensible.

One of the oddest things about it was that Sera had not once cried in their presence. Mothers tended to do that, and that was an awful thing, but Sera was something entirely different. They spoke about some heavy, dark shit that left Rachel in tears, but Sera… she just spoke like it was something mundane to her. It hurt, but she was so exhausted by it that she physically couldn't tear up. So there she sat, talking about the times she nearly died like she was discussing the weather.

With all of this happening, there was a persistent question which ate away at Chloe's confidence, at least in the first few days. With Sera and Rachel united and hashing shit out, and James now holding a firm hand over the interaction; Did Rachel still even need her? Did James?

These things were left unanswered because she did not ask them. Although so far that wasn't the case, fear that one day Rachel was going to wake up and realize that she didn't need Chloe anymore kept her… worried.

Fuck Eliot for planting that seed of doubt. Thankfully the asshole had more or less fucked off. He was hanging with some junior named Warren or something along those lines. He'd look hers and Rachel's way every so often if Chloe was dropping or picking Rachel up from school, but that was about it.
"Chloe!" she heard called from downstairs. "Get your breakfast!"

Packing the last of the spare change of clothing, and paint rags to wear for their work into the duffle bag Rachel had loaned her, Chloe zipped it up, pushed her fear to the back of her thoughts and left her room.

It was Saturday, and Rachel and she were going to spend the night at the Junk shack. Between the excitement of Sera's re-entry into the Amber life, and school, they had been putting off chilling there and fixing the place up. Now with the forest fire now under apparent control, it was safe enough to go there with having to worry. The truck was packed with spare wood, insulation and paint collected by both girls over the course of the past few weeks and now all that was needed was the labour.

As Chloe reached the stairs, she paused and glanced at her mom's open bedroom. She set the bag down and entered the room, glancing around at it.

It was official now: David was squatting in her house. She was not fucking having it. It had become a point of contention which was now spilling out of her hands and reaching into the Amber domain. Rachel wanted to move to the school dorm, and she was gently pushing Chloe to do the same so that she didn't deal with the shit. She didn't know how she'd afford that, but Rachel was adamant that the scholarship would more than likely cover that expense. It was a tempting idea.

She even talked to James about the David situation. James had insisted on taking her the DMV to get her truck street legal before she continued to operate it (go figure). She wasn't sure why she did talk about the douche. Perhaps it was out of boredom, perhaps it was because for the first time in a long time, there was someone in her life that didn't either look down on her, attempt to coddle her nor did he outright dismiss her either.

True to her image of him, James didn't do much to alleviate her concerns. He didn't say to respect him like David would say and he didn't dismiss it like Mom often said she should do. Instead he looked her dead in the eye as he explained the aptly named 'Cinderella Effect', and trotted out the statistics on the elevated risk of physical and sexual abuse step parents had against their step children. He stated it was a contested theory, but he would sooner have her be safe than sorry.

Chloe doubted David would ever do something like that, he was a douche bag, but would he actually hit her? When she said she didn't think it would happen, she quickly found out that this was a subject which James Amber didn't deal with in hypotheticals. He took her phone and added his office number to her contacts.

"Even if you're acting like yourself, if he lays a finger on you and/or your mother, you call me and I will deal with it..." he said to her flatly.

So, armed with the proverbial nuclear code that was the full power of a DA, Chloe silently stepped into her mom's room and without lingering for much longer opened the drawer to her Mom's desk and silently she dug around until she felt something metallic.

"Even if you're acting like yourself, if he lays a finger on you and/or your mother, you call me and I will deal with it..." he said to her flatly.

She paused her searching and pulled out an old metal strapped watch. Quietly, she looked at the old time piece, a faint smile on her mouth as she examined it. After a moment, she pocketed it and closed the drawer. With Mom moving on in her life, she doubted very much that she would have a need for another relic belonging to William Price.

Grabbing the duffle bag again, Chloe stomped down the stairs and entered to kitchen to find Mom was hovering over the stove, cooking up a couple of eggs for the douchebag, who was making a huge fucking racket in the garage and yelling incoherently to himself.
She reached placed one arm around her Mom's shoulder and kissed her cheek. Today was going to be too good a fucking day to be too pissy in Mom's presence.

"Well now, I know you're up to something," Mom muttered as Chloe pulled back. "Let me guess, Rachel is coming over and you're going to raise all sorts of hell?"

Chloe rolled her eyes as she grabbed a pancake off the stack and leaned her back into the counter. A loud *'dammit, where is it?!'* broke out from the garage.

"We're a regular Thelma and Louise duo," Chloe returned obnoxiously as she ate and talked at the same time. "Don't worry; we won't use our one phone call to bug you or the boyfriend. What's up his ass, anyways?"

Mom did not chide her like usual. She just sort of shifted in place, like she was uncomfortable with something.

"Oh… he misplaced something. His move in has been difficult," she dismissed the question in a way Chloe usually did. She glanced to her daughter and added. "I got something I wanted to ask you about Rachel's father… and I hope you will keep it to yourself."

Scooping a handful of hot bacon, Chloe nodded to her Mom. She was good at keeping things to herself.

Usually…

Generally…

Fuck… okay, so if Rachel were to ask her, she'd tell her exactly what Mom had said word for word… unless she really wanted to impress Rachel, then she'd be proactive and blurt it out right away. She loved her Mom, and Mom was great and all, but she didn't have the unique potential rewards which Rachel was a little more than willing to bestow. Honesty being a huge fucking turn on for the lioness of a girl.

Yeah, yeah… loyalty to family was an important thing, but she was still a 16 year old who thought with her vaginal brain from time to time. Fucking sue her.

"Ever since James Amber asked me to put in a good word the new server, he's been coming in often like he's checking up on her. They have long and serious conversations," Mom pressed on, nearly making Chloe choke on her food. "I don't overhear them, but it's obvious. I like James, don't get me wrong. Everything he has done for us, for you… that scholarship he found for you, I will never not be grateful… but I'm… concerned."

Chloe blinked. Mom had hired Sera? Sera had mentioned that she had gotten a job, but she seemed to be vague about where it was. It had been quite some time since Chloe went to the Two Whales, especially after starting hanging out with Rachel. Too much shit to entertain themselves with.

Chloe put the pieces together. Sera had a job working with mom, and James was making a habit to going to the Diner. Chloe always sort of thought that wouldn't be his thing. He was nice, but she figured, like, he had too much money to slum down with the blue collar slobs; but it did make sense why he would be there.

While she completely understood where her Mom was coming from (as it had been Rachel and hers assumption at one point as well) It made sense to Chloe why James would be checking up on Sera as often as he was. James was not about to just up and forget the decade and a half of Sera's failures in a month. Not only was he going to keep an eye on her, he was going to be a fixture to
ensure that Sera's remained firmly fixed on the path of recovery.

"Oh my God, he's so not banging Sera," Chloe blurted out, a little more dramatically then she probably meant to be and definitely not meaning to use those words.

Mom narrowed her eyes at Chloe for name dropping Sera. Chloe winced. She probably should not have done that.

"Wait a second. You know her?" Mom asked her curiously.

Averting her eyes, Chloe continued to chew on her bacon. It was clear Mom didn't know the truth, and as much as it sucked… she couldn't betray the Amber family's trust this soon into everything. The secret would come out in due time, but now was not the right moment.

"The night I went to go to that show… Firewalk… she… well, she's the reason why I only ended up with a black eye. She kept Rachel safe also," Chloe carefully edited the truth for her inquisitive mother. "She had… has heavy personal problem. James decided to help her out for what she did for us. So… can you just be cool with her, okay?"

Chloe was proud of herself for the choice of words she used. Technically speaking it was Rachel who saved her ass; but without Sera there would be no Rachel and no Rachel meant no aforementioned ass saving from those dickholes. It was a convoluted truth, but it was a version of the truth she could give to Mom.

Mom smiled as she dished up a plate for David. Apparently the idea of Sera protecting Chloe was an idea Mom clearly could live with, and if that little lie could help Sera out, then all the better for her. Fuck knows she could use all the help she could get.

"Chloe, I am the original model of cool," Mom cockily announced as she set the spatula down. "Besides, I wouldn't cause her any trouble even if she did save you; she seems like a genuine sweetheart..."

Patting Chloe's cheek, Mom lifted the plate full of food and went off to go feed her pet walking vibrator. Gathering a couple more pancakes, Chloe backed out of the kitchen. She was late and Rachel was gonna get hella pissy about it.

... 

Rachel Amber had an inhuman work ethic and Chloe just fucking knew she had to put a dent into that.

The moment the girls arrived at the junkyard, Rachel went into full blown professional mode. There was no time for jokes or slacking off, she had taken command over Chloe and put her to work. Chloe found herself doing grunt work, clearing some of the scrap metal away from the shed, filling in holes with plywood. As she did this, Rachel was inside the shed, cleaning out every crack and crevice and working in insulation inside the walls.

Neither of them really knew if they were doing it right, but it seemed like it was being done right so fuck it. If it wasn't it wasn't like they had to hang out in the junkyard during winter or anything. Rachel was convinced she'd be in the Blackwell dorms by Fall so they could chill there. She made mention that there was an empty double dorm room which was a very unsubtle hint. She would have to have a talk with Mom about it, but… she was coming around to the idea of living in
Blackhell…

After a lunch consisting junk food and energy drinks, the girls broke out Chloe's painting clothing and went to work covering the place up. Rachel looked particularly funny wearing clothing that was too big for even Chloe. They didn't have a particularly large quantity of one colour, the shack was a hue of white, crimson, brown, green… it was a fucking mess, and they were mostly just doing it for fun.

After about two hours of work, they decided to call it quits. The first and only coat was applied and silently, the girls moved everything back into the shed and took in their surroundings. Chloe looked to Rachel, and she seemed immensely… satisfied by all they had done. It was hard work, but well worth the effort in her eyes. Chloe's as well.

She liked to see Rachel like this, smiling and just... at peace with everything. Rachel was such a storm about everything, so to see her settled and relaxed was a real treat.

As Chloe approached her to make a totally PG move on her, Rachel rounded back on her and ran the red paint coated roller right up Chloe's chest, making the older girl freeze up. Rachel goggled, as though she had pulled off the cleverest fucking thing she had ever done in her life.

"Ohhhh you are sooooo dead!" Chloe growled playfully.

She watched as Rachel's eyes widen as she quickly ducked out of reach and ran from the shack emitting a hilarious mixture of a scream and a laugh as Chloe bolted after her, scooping up her own roller coated in white paint. She chased Rachel, who was looking like she was going to seek sanctuary in the truck. Unfortunately for her, while she had speed, she lacked the stride Chloe possessed and it wasn't long before the huffing and puffing Price girl ran her paint roller up Rachel's back.

Rachel screeched and bounced forward, startling Chloe momentarily. She turned around and tackled the stunned Chloe to the ground. With one hand she pinned both of Chloe's into the dirt as her other hand ran through her hair. Chloe pretended to struggle. She'd easily break Rachel's grip… but this was not exactly a position she was going to try to fight too hard to escape from.

She cursed her false submission, what she would do to snake her fingers up the curves Rachel's paint gear hid…

"You better not have gotten paint in my hair, Big Blue!" Rachel complained like she was the victim of the paint attack in the first place.

"That nickname better not fucking stick, Drama Queen!" Chloe hissed right back, exploding into wild laughter.

Rachel stopped searching, seemingly satisfied that Chloe's paint counteroffensive hadn't touched the mane of blonde hair. She smiled again as she remained straddling Chloe's chest. She bent down and gently touched the tip of Chloe's nose with her lips; briefly they grazed her lips as well. It was not a traditional kiss, it was just two pairs of lips sharing the same air.

Rachel pulled back; smirking at the stupid expression etched on Chloe's face and released her grip on the girls’ wrist. She rolled off Chloe and sat there in the dirt, quietly contemplating the shack they had spent the past eight or so hours fixed up.

"Hmm…” Rachel breathed as Chloe sat up next to her. "You know, this place went from rat infested shithole, to a shithole. A couple more days of hard work, it'll be a liveable shithole. I think
this calls for a reward…"

Rachel clambered up to her feet, her hand touching Chloe's shoulder for a moment before she walked towards the truck. In a moment or two, she came back and took a seat next to Chloe, her backpack in hand. She unzipped it and removed a 40 of Sambuca. She jiggled the bottle in front of Chloe, who reached out and snatched it from her hands. She opened the bottle, breathing in the faint scent of liquorice before she took a sip.

Swallowing the mouthful of alcohol, she handed it over to Rachel who took a drink as well. They were both in silent agreement that they would pace themselves so that they didn't end up like they had the last time they got trashed. The two of them remained silent, their focus back on the shack. Rachel fastened the lid on the bottle and leaned into Chloe, her head nestling into her side.

"Look at us," Rachel murmured to her. "Didn't I say something about watching paint dry with you?"

Chloe smiled slightly and wrapped her arm around Rachel. Rachel did always find a way to honour everything she said.

As they remained connected to each other, Chloe came to a decision. Rachel had every right to know what she knew about Sera's employment. Together they'd be able to come up with some sort of plan; if there was a desire on Rachel's part to do something of course. Sera and Rachel were still on shaky grounds. She would not poke and prod into Sera's business unless Rachel made it crystal clear that it was something she'd like.

"So..." Chloe started, attempting to be as casual as she could. "I got interesting news."

Rachel looked up at Chloe curiously.

"Chloe Price has interesting news?" she repeated sarcastically. "Colour me surprised, usually she's such a bore!"

Chloe pushed her lightly.

"Well then, I guess you don't want to know where Sera is working these days," Chloe replied, faking a sense of casualness.

That was all it took. Rachel pulled herself away from Chloe and silently she examined Chloe as though searching the other girl for any trace of deception. Her expression had hardened somewhat. It was sort of as though this was something she both wanted and didn't want to hear about. She did not tell her off, so Chloe assumed it was the former.

"Your Dad talked to Joyce and got her a job at the Two Whales," Chloe informed her silently staring friend. "I thought you'd like to know... maybe we could drop in for an off the book visit?"

Rachel did not answer. She was contemplating whether or not it was the right thing to do. Both girls were painfully aware at James' insistence that Rachel was not to be in contact with Sera outside the regular supervised visits. While his trust for Sera was still low, his compassion for the woman seemed to steadily growing. It was less about Rachel's and more about Sera.

As strong as she may have seemed, it was obvious that Sera was in a very fragile place in her recovery; both girls were fully aware of this now that they had quite a few interactions with her under their belts. She seemed to be getting better each time, but there was no denying she was in any sort of position to be responsible for others. Risking that would be a pretty selfish thing to do.
Maybe it was a stupid thing to bring up to Rachel. She should have just kept it to herself.

"Maybe you could do that…" Rachel suggested lowly, her hand reaching out to take Chloe's. "I… well… it's draining still to interact with her within the allotted time… but if you were to drop by on her shifts, maybe you could get her to drop her guard?"

Chloe snorted as she snatched the bottle out of Rachel's hand.

"Me?" she said as she took a drink. "Get her guard down?"

Rachel nodded slightly, her hand squeezing Chloe's tightly.

"You are a remarkably disarming girl, Price," she buttered Chloe up, her smile widening. "My Mom… Sera… I think she's trying to be at her best around me… Maybe you could see if that's what she's doing. I want to trust her… but after everything she did… I don't want to get fucked over like that ever again."

Chloe nodded, understanding Rachel's dilemma. It was a rare thing to get Rachel to call Sera her Mom. She didn't use it around James and certainly not Rose, and consistently called Sera by her first name whenever they were together. It seemed as though Chloe was the only person she'd use the title around.

Deciding something should be done; Chloe reached into her paint stained pants and retrieved her phone.

"Tell you what, I'll hit up my Mom to see when Sera works next," Chloe murmured as she started typing out a text to Mom. "If it's tomorrow morning, I'll go to town, pick up some breakfast for us and see if I can talk to her."

The kiss Rachel planted on her cheek was a good sign she was going to have a great evening…


With her head swimming with almost half a forty of Sambuca flowing through her veins, Rachel felt her mind was adrift and at peace as she laid there resting in arms of her Chloe; both of them bundled up in blankets which she had brought from home.

Together they were stretched out together in the truck bed, gazing up at the stars, and speaking about everything and nothing. Sometimes they'd lapse into long protracted silence, but it was never uncomfortable. For Rachel at least, this month together without the spectre of Dad's lie or Sera's existence haunting them had been eye opening.

While there was developments with her family, it was Chloe who had surprised her the most. With Chloe in her life, it felt like a piece of her that was missing since forever had finally been reunited with her. It was sort of was like they were two damaged souls which had interlocked and together created a single mended one. Admittedly, this was sort of a dramatic thing to suggest, and she would never admit it allowed, not even to the girl next to her, but it was just something she felt.

It was just that everything just felt as though it all finally fit together. She knew where she came from. It was Chloe who had helped to put all the pieces back together. Dad was now being honest with her (trying to anyways) and although she was still extremely upset with him, it felt that he was genuinely making a conciliatory move. Mom and she were closer than ever now. Rachel
understood the sacrifice and effort it must have taken for her to step into a marriage with a child that was not her blood; but she had done it and did it in such a way that showed so much unconditional love to her. For the years of motherhood and unconditional love that her adopted Mom gave Rachel, Rachel would never forget them.

Then there was Sera.

Sera was a challenge the likes of which Rachel had never known. She was quiet and enigmatic, and not in a charming way. It came off as that of a tired and sad person, weary and damaged from the pain she had caused and ceaselessly endured. Getting to know her had given Rachel the impression that Sera more or less a one woman anti-drug PSA; which was a good thing she supposed. Still, she was trying her hardest with Rachel, and she did appreciate that effort. It must have been a difficult thing to do… transitioning out of the drug culture and into another person's life.

There was still so much she wanted to know, so much she wanted to say, wanted to be able to say. But neither of them was ready for that. That was something that scared her the most: never being able to say these things. As much as the abandonment had hurt when the truth finally revealed itself, as much as she loved Rose for becoming her Mother, there was a desire building Rachel to be able to sit Sera down and tell her that she loved her.

Perhaps that would be years off. Perhaps it might never happen, but still the temptation remained. She couldn't deny that there was something deep inside which was telling her that maybe if she said those words; it would be enough to break Sera out of her self-loathing and help her learn to forgive herself. Instead of picking up the pieces, what Sera her might have needed was a hard reset. The two of them starting from scratch if that was at all possible.

Next to her, she felt Chloe shuffle and sit up, unceremoniously pushing Rachel off her human pillow and lying flat for a moment. She looked up to Chloe, who through the camp fire they built a little ways off from the truck looked pensive and drunk. Her hand ran through her hair as she turned to face Rachel.

"Hey..." Chloe spoke as Rachel sat up as well. "... So I got you something... and don't make a big deal out of it."

Making a point not to make Chloe any promises, she watched Chloe reach into her pocket and took Rachel's hand. Silently she produced something metallic and pressed it into the palm of her hand. Rachel examined it through the fire light and found herself staring at a vintage Swiss mechanical watch. The watch dial was not moving, it was permanently stuck at 4:47.

Rachel looked up and found Chloe to be extremely nervous and conflicted, like she thought she had made a mistake and wanted to snatch it back from her.

"A broken watch?" Rachel inquired curiously, trying to lighten the mood. "Are you trying to say something?"

Chloe shook her head quickly. The attempt to lighten the mood that only made the girl appear even more upset by the words Rachel had offered up. Rachel did her best to ignore the pang in the pit of her heart that told her how much she fucked up.

"No Rachel..." Chloe returned, sounding unnaturally quiet. "This was my Dad's watch..."

As she put the pieces together, Rachel was left speechless. That was a mistake, as she watched in silence as Chloe rolled her eyes, her frustration growing obvious.
"No, I'm not morbid enough to give you something he was wearing when he died..." she needlessly had to say as Rachel held her gaze on her. "He was wearing the watch in the delivery room the night I graced this world with my presence. He pulled out the spring, so that he always had the moment in his hands... at least that was what he said to me when I asked... and I asked him a lot of times about it."

She paused for a moment, her hand rubbing the back of her neck.

"I just... figured that since you've entrusted me with something that means the world to you... I should return the trust," she said, gently touching Sera's bracelet wrapped around her wrist. "You keep making me these promises about sticking by me... and I think I need to say it out loud. I care about you, Rachel, and no matter how all of... this... turns out, you're going to always have me in your corner. Even... even if you fucking hate me one day and want to leave me behind, I'll help you escape the Bay... I'm always gonna have your back."

The words reverberated in her mind as Rachel felt the full weight of what this was. Chloe had entrusted her with one of the relics of William Price. Chloe didn't part from her past easily, and yet here she was looking at the watch her father wore the moment Chloe entered his and Joyce's life. She never expected something so personal offered up. Hell, she had never even anticipated this was even possible...

Rachel looked up and found Chloe watching her carefully. With a single gesture, Chloe had told her she had loved her without uttering the word.

"You... really know how to sweep a girl off her feet..." Rachel breathed back to her. "This... this is too much... this is far too personal for you to just give to me."

Chloe reached out and wrapped Rachel's fingers around the time piece.

"It's why I want you to have it," she insisted, unblinking as she stared into Rachel's eyes. "I've had a lot of time to think, and I think my dad would have thought you were great... and that he'd love you like you were one of his own. So... please will you take it?"

Rachel tore her eyes away from Chloe's soft blues reluctantly. Examining the watch for a moment longer she nodded and as though the watch was glass, she gently wrapped it around her wrist and fastened it. She looked up and found Chloe at peace with everything. It was such a good look on her. Nothing troubled her or brought her down. She seemed content.

Wanting to experience that feeling first hand, Rachel leaned forward and captured Chloe's lips with her own for a moment before she reluctantly pulled back, her fingers intertwining into Chloe's.

"I'm never taking it off, Chloe Price..." she promised the girl across from her.

Chloe huffed a small laugh as she shrugged.

"Well, I think you should every so often..." she suggested to her. "I like you wearing it, but I also don't want you to get gangrene or some shit..."

The two girls shared a soft laugh. A thrill rushed though Rachel as Chloe reached out and pushed her hand through her hair, bringing the short girl close to her again. They kissed, deeper this time, but Chloe found enough restraint to pull back slightly.

"Are we being too sappy?" Chloe spoke, her forehead still touching hers.

Rachel shrugged and leaned back in so that's she could kiss her Chloe again.
"Perfect sappy…” she amended as she rested into Chloe's arm. The only noise being made was that of the crackling of the campfire.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much for your kind words on the last chapter. As Sera seems to be a success, I'll be adding one extra chapter to this part so I can fit a little more into it.

Next Chapter: Sera deals with the worst sort of pain out there: A Chloe Price sized pain in the ass.
With the clock on the wall flashing 8:17 am, Sera sighed as she cracked her neck.

Most people didn't like to work graveyard shifts, but she did not mind them at all. She didn't sleep regular hours, so it seemed only fitting to take those shifts whenever they came up. The work was relatively quiet, and she got to take a break to watch the sun rise over Arcadia Bay, which was always a nice half an hour or so to decompress.

Having spent much of her adult life roaming from city to city, she had thought she would never be able to stand a small town again. She swore up and down that she would rather be dead before she returned to one in her youth; a promise she had uttered one night drinking hard with James, who made her a promise that they'd run and never return to a population with less than a few hundred thousand people.

Now look at them: James was voluntarily living the small town life, and now that she had experienced actual physical death, she decided she'd give small towns another chance.

Honestly, she had sort of come to appreciate the charms of this sort of life. Things were quiet and went at a slower pace, which she welcomed. The people were a lot friendlier and didn't seem to know what Sera was… still technically was; and if they did, they were far too polite to care.

A rather strange development which had come up was that she had sort of made friends here at work, which was a really peculiar thing. She never had friends in the past fifteen years; just a series of people who would try to use her for the constant financial support she had coming in. She was far too strung out to care they were using her. They alleviated the loneliness to a certain extent, feeding their addictions was a small price to pay.

But no one used her here. Everyone was nice to her and patient if she messed up, which was prevalent in the first weeks. Joyce Price in particular was quick to cover her. Although she couldn't say she knew Chloe, it was obvious to see where the loyalty to Rachel had come from. She was a tired and proud woman, who Sera had come to envy for her strength.

Last night was different between them however. Joyce was waiting for her as Sera started her shift, a smile and a hot plate of pastries and tea waiting for her. Apparently Chloe had not only said she knew her, but that she had been saved by her from Damon Merrick's pissed off goons. It wasn't true, but she was not about to say anything otherwise. Chloe probably had to lie when Joyce got too close to the truth.

So, when the doors to the Two Whales opened and in swaggered Chloe Price like she owned the place, Sera was not surprised in the slightest. Well, perhaps she was a little surprised by her presence. Any self-respecting teenager would not be caught dead awake at eight in the morning, and yet here she was.

Chloe scanned the room and as soon as she noticed Sera she stepped over causally, her hands in her pockets, her bracelet still dangling there like it was a fixture to her now. It was a stark reminder who how attached the two girls were. Sera found herself tempted to look out the windows to see if
Rachel was out in the truck, but she remembered her place and merely issued the tall girl a warm smile as she slumped down in the stool next to her.

"Hello Chloe," Sera broke the silence first. "How are you?"

Chloe sort of grinned.

"Fine, fine..." Chloe half-hearted said as she dug into her pocket. She pulled out a handful of change and a crumpled bill and slapped it on the counter.

"So, random question, I got five dollars and thirty-two cents and I need to feed two people," Chloe continued, much more lively as she turned to face Sera. "I mean, I can't promise Rachel is gonna get to eat, but I'll try to be considerate; do you have any ideas?"

Shaking her head slightly, Sera reached over the counter to retrieve a menu and placed it down in front of Chloe.

"Save your money. Pick and choose..." she answered the girl. "That is, so long as you do feed Rachel."

Chloe's face brightened up like she had hit a jackpot. She pocketed her money and grabbed the menu.

"That's fucking cool, thanks Sera! In that case, Rachel gets to eat!" Chloe spoke happily. "Mom doesn't let me use hers often; something about running the Diner out of business or some shit."

Sera smiled, she somehow doubted that Joyce wasn't far off from the truth. She remained silent, watching as Chloe took her obvious bribe unquestioningly as she scanned the menu and listed off a variety of waffles, pancakes, eggs and bacon to go from the morning server, Erin.

Standing up, Sera reached out, her hand pressing on Chloe's shoulder. It caught the girl's attention. She gestured to the open corner booth. It was probably better for the two of them to speak with some measure of privacy. Chloe nodded and slid off of her stool and followed Sera's lead.

"So get this," Chloe spoke as she slumped down into the booth as Sera stepped out of her way. "Yesterday, I'm minding my own business when I find out my Mom had her arm gently twisted into hiring you from James... why would you ever work this place?"

Sera didn't answer her right away. She ignored the slight tingling of anger she felt that the teenager was deriding the place that was keeping a roof over head. That feeling actually made her pause... usually she thought she was cooler than that.

Perhaps this was what maturity felt like...

"Not too many people are willing to hire people with drug possession charges and lack of steady legitimate work," Sera answered finally, her fingers lacing together as she glanced out the window. "I kind of like it... it gives me some sort of direction... like there is purpose outside of reclaiming everything I threw out."

Sera softened her slight frown back into a careful smile. She wanted nothing more than to ask the girl where Rachel was, if she was here. She could feel her anxiety growing for an answer, the little black tar stain calling her back into a relapse as she watched Chloe drum on her lap and look away.

Damn it. She needed a cigarette badly.
"I suspected it would not be long now before I would run into you here," Sera broke the silence deciding the conversation was a distraction she needed right now. "It's... good that you did not bring Rachel. As much as it would have been nice, I would rather honour any agreements I'm holding myself to."

She paused and examined the girl. Chloe seemed somewhat despondent, like she was gearing up to lay into Sera with a series of uncomfortable questions that Rachel would be the ones asking. So this was how it was. Chloe was serving as a proxy to her daughter. They had thought her to be completely subservient to the girls simply because of how much she had fucked up.

Perhaps it was time to turn it on its head... Show Chloe where the fire actually came from... just a bit... even if it was just embers, so utterly overshadowed by her child.

"For a month now I've been answering a lot of questions, and I have accepted that Rachel would have this level of curiosity," Sera spoke up before Chloe, her eyes unblinking as she stared at the girl. "I have torn old wounds open just to explain myself and I am willing to do it again and again and again until Rachel and I are on the same page. I do not expect you to understand the misery this has been for me, but I do hope you can understand why I will not fall into your trap."

She remained stone faced as Chloe processed the fact that she was no longer the spider. She was the fly in the web.

"That's not to say we cannot talk, because I have a lot of things I've want to ask my daughter... and I see now that it might be better to ask you things instead," Sera pressed forward slowly, meticulously. "There is much I need to say to you, and I don't have to restrain myself quite as much around you, now do I?"

"'You consider her your daughter?' Chloe blurted out. "Even after everything, you still think that?"

Sera felt her heart lurch as an almost insurmountable anger rose into her chest. Exhaling unsteadily through her nose, she leaned forward, her hands gripping the edge of the table as she glared at the noticeably shrinking child who had just realized how terribly she had just fucked up.

"Because she is my daughter; I carried that girl in my womb for nine months, and endured every bodily horror that came with it. The joy of pregnancy is a lie. It's a horror show, and I put myself through that so you can have her, just like your mother did so Rachel could have you..." Sera growled lowly, an undercurrent to her cold tone. "I know Rachel will never call me her Mom, and I do not contest that I will ever replace Rose Amber, but I do get to have some sort of claim in her. Even if the connection is only through blood, I will take it. If she is uncomfortable with me calling her that, I will live with that, but I will call her my daughter on my own time and since here you are intruding on my time I won't let you question that. Understood?"

Sera blinked and pried her head back to look at the officially submissive Chloe Price.

She hadn't meant to get that bitchy, but she had so little left in her life, that even the slightest attack on her validity was grounds to burn down everything. It was what nearly led to the huge blow up between James and her before James came back to the table in a more conciliatory mood.

While it was sort of reasonable for James and her to fight like this, her reaction to a 16 year old girl ignorantly pushing her buttons was not. She had done too far.

Chloe was right...she was not exactly a mother in any sense of the word.

"I'm sorry, Sera... I worded that wrong. I got a big fucking mouth and it gets me into trouble," she
heard Chloe speak guardedly, as though she was prepared to go to war like her, but was making a last ditch effort to reconcile. "It's just… you seem so aloof with her… like you're keeping a distance."

Sera couldn't look her in the eye. This had been a humiliating moment for her. She should have been better than this. She had no business snapping at the child sitting across from her.

"Because I am keeping a distance," Sera spoke, keeping her eyes fixed on her lap. "Not just out of respect for Rose, but because I'm living in constant fear that Rachel will stop wanting to see me, or that James will just shut down the meetings. A month of this doesn't even begin to put a dent in what I had done."

She heard Chloe snort derisively.

"He wouldn't do that," Chloe reminded her. "Rachel and James aren't okay, and she would have his head if he did something like that."

Sera emitted a humourless chuckle. As much as Rachel resented her, she still in-explicitly resented James even more. She had been gently approaching the subject, but Rachel would shut her down every time. She either had to hammer it hard, or just let Rachel come around to the conclusion on her own. Sera was leaning more towards the former.

"I know… and I'm sorry as well for my anger," Sera replied, finding the courage to face the girl again. "I was a teenager once, I sometimes forget that teenagers have deep thoughts, and strong opinions... but have a lack the words to articulate them..."

The two of them remained silent looking at each other. Sera watched as Chloe struggled to remain straight faced. She failed and broke down into laughter. Sera chuckled along and leaned back into her seat. It was nice to get along with Chloe… …even if it was obvious this girl wanted to fuck her daughter into the ground…

She wondered just how was it James could handle that thought in the back of his mind. He was very close to Chloe beyond the excuse of working with Chloe Price to keep Rachel safe. He seemed to hold a genuine affection for her. Contrast that affection with the fact that these days Rachel and Chloe always seemed to have matching love bites in obvious (and possible unobvious) places. They hadn't stepped their relationship up, however. She was a shitty Mother, but she knew when people were sleeping together.

When she brought this quasi relationship up to James and Rose, they had both been talking about it and had decided the Chloe would need to have The Talk, but only until they made things official. They didn't want to freak out Rachel's best friend; and now that Sera had found a place into Rachel's life, it was decided by Rose and James to include it. A 'triumvirate of concerned parents' to handle this as Rose called it, to which James looked amused and so Sera had to nod and look that word up on her phone while they were not looking.

She really should have went to school… or at least took the school did go to more seriously.

"I would not be stretching much in assuming that you and Rachel are together," Sera asked delicately, her hands folding back together on the table top.

She took in the sight of Chloe tingeing a dark red at the statement she had made. It was rather sweet to see the girl, who had come across as shamelessly brave get this flustered at the merest hint that the secret Rachel and her were trying to keep from her was not a secret at all.
"We're... friends..." was all Chloe could get out.

Sera lips slowly formed into a smile.

"Sure, friends like James and I were friends at your age..." Sera softly teased the girl who was shifting uncomfortably in her seat. "Unless Rachel more or less High School proposing to you in front of the school is a new millennial thing to do... and yes, I was there."

Chloe's mouth was slightly unhinged as she realized Sera had seen the production that veered way off course at Rachel's design. Although she was a little stiff up there, Sera thought that Chloe had done well, and that her improvisation in the face of Rachel's unpredictability was quite a talent in itself.

"That was... Rachel, just being Rachel...I think..."Chloe attempted to explain away. "We've sort of talked about it every so often. We decided to see if we're capable of being friends before we started... something else."

Sera exhaled and nodded. Starting a heterosexual relationship was difficult by itself. She could only imagine the challenge it must have faced for both girls to take that final sort of plunge. Even voicing their feelings must have taken no small amount of courage to admit feeling something as overwhelming as love to someone of the same gender. She also didn't know how friendly their peers would be towards it. Even a whiff of homosexuality back in her high school days warranted a swift 'corrective' beating.

That was just how it went in her youth... but things changed... perhaps it would be better. Besides, if Rachel had to deal with anyone, at least she would have a girlfriend right next to her to provide support and the occasional as kicking... defensive as kicking.

Falling in love ultimately required unbelievable amount of courage regardless of who it was... and sometimes all that was needed was a gentle outside push in the right direction; and maybe Sera was the right person to do that.

"And now you're friends..." Sera inched her plot forward. "...Isn't it about time to be a little brave for her?"

She watched, hiding her own satisfaction as her words hit the mark and Chloe Price pushed herself back into her seat small grin crossing on her face as though she had just had an epiphany. As soon as the grin appeared, it had vanished back into a pensive expression as she turned back to look at Sera again.

"You're... okay with it?" she asked, a note of disbelief in her voice.

Offering the girl an encouraging smile, Sera nodded firmly. She had no say or right even to interfere in the affairs that were solely Chloe and Rachel's, but if the girl wanted reassurances that there would be no interference on her part, then God knows she deserved it.

Chloe smiled, but it was still... off. Like there were still many unspoken fears she held about this.

"It's just... James is really fucking weird about it," she murmured as she pressed her back into the seat again. "He's cool with me at least for now... but it's like he's okay with her and me in principal, but you just know he's not..."

She trailed off, allowing Sera to absorb the inference she was making. There was a strange feeling brewing some where in her. Like...she had to defend James from a child who didn't really mean to harm his character. It was a very peculiar thing.
"As far as I can tell, that isn't a homophobia thing if that is what you're implying," Sera answered Chloe's unspoken accusation. "Consider for a moment that his only daughter is attracted to someone and he's a father. Of course he's going to be weird about it… especially when he genuinely likes you."

That caught Chloe Price off guard. She stared at Sera stupidly and just sort of blinked.

"...he does?" she said incredulously. "Rachel figures he's... investing in me. I don't know what I should believe. He's... great, but I don't know if I should trust him."

Staring at the girl for a moment, Sera stood up from her seat and slid into the same booth as Chloe. She didn't want to be overheard before, and now she definitely didn't want to be overheard.

"Rachel's anger makes her assume the worst in him," she started. "When James looks at you, he's looking into a mirror into his past. He sees the exact same doubts and uncertainties in you that he had himself, and more dangerously, the passion you have."

Sera emitted a small hallowed out laugh.

"James was..." She paused, and shook her head. "Oh god, James was so passionate about everything; especially for those he loves. You can see it in his love for Rachel and Rose. That... desire to protect what is his."

"And you," Chloe pointed out.

Staring at the girl next to her, Sera nodded curtly.

"And me..." she amended. "James and I... for a while we were great together - Ying and Yang – I think I loved him the moment I first laid eyes on that... that total dork. He had such big plans, he wanted to take that passion and idealism and do his part to save the planet: environmental lobbying work, endangered species protection, the whole nine yards. He was convinced he was going to change the world."

The smile which had formed on her face caused by the wave of nostalgia died.

"All those years we were together, he showed me nothing but unconditional love and devotion..." Sera spoke slowly in a slight daze. "And... and... God it was never enough, and to this day I'm... I'm still trying to find an answer to give him about why it wasn't."

She looked away from Chloe. She was far too ashamed as she pushed her hand through her hair.

"I wish... I wish Rachel could understand the amount of pain and suffering James went through to destroy his love for me in order to protect her. We were each other's worlds for such a long time," she continued, staring down at the table. "He didn't lie to hurt her. He hid the truth because pretending I didn't exist was the only way to protect his heart. If he didn't do that, he probably would be a far more distant man to her. His heart mended. He fell in love again, and for fifteen years Rachel has had a father who may have to work too much, but ultimately loves her before everything else... a family even."

Sera paused only long enough to breathe and reorganize her thoughts. Everything was so fuzzy; she could feel the little black tar stain in the back of her mind calling yet again.

"But it came at a sacrifice: his passion for the outside world. He's tired and jaded and doesn't put his trust or faith in others easily as he once did," Sera continued, struggling to maintain her tone from collapsing into a raspy weep. "He had to cut everything else he loved out to protect Rachel
from what I was… and that's how I destroyed him. I ruined him right to his core, and I have to live with the fact that I killed the beautiful soul of a man I absolutely adored… adore."

Sera ceased speaking and collapsed back into a self-loathing induced silence, staring off as she returned to an old familiar place.

This time, however, was different. The only thing that kept her steady, kept her from going back was the tentative hand of Chloe Price pressing onto her shoulder. She looked over to the girl and smiled slightly. She was a sweetheart.

She was a sweetheart, and she needed to be saved from herself.

"My point is, is that you look the part of a tough girl, and sometimes you act it, and that was James too…" she continued, finally gentle Chloe's gentle gaze. "And just like James, you wear your heart in the open for Rachel... and that sort unselfish love someone else is a beautiful means of self-destruction."

Chloe squinted at her, her hand dropping off Sera's shoulder.

"You want me to protect myself from Rachel, like she's dangerous like you were?" she asked the older woman disbelievingly.

Sera shook her head, daring to reach out and take her hand.

"No Chloe, I want you to protect yourself because you have just as much right to put yourself first as you do for Rachel," she murmured back to the teenager. "You can't… keep living like this; with this gaping wound your father left behind…"

Sera watched as the girl recoiled, but Sera clutched onto her hand still. Chloe seemed surprised, but it didn't take much to put everything together. Well… all it took was overhearing a call to her boyfriend, and a question levelled to James to get a clear picture.

Chloe's face contorted out of shock and into anger. She wrenched her hand away from Sera and stood up. Sera stood as well and moved out of her way. She did not want to cause a scene.

"Only warning: don't talk about my dad like that," Chloe growled under her breath.

The older woman nodded. She had taken it a step farther then she should have; but at least the cards were on the table. At least Chloe would have something to think about and perhaps she would learn from the mistakes made by both James and herself.

Perhaps Rachel and she could survive…

"I am sorry. My only intention was to warn you… and not to offend," Sera attempted to elaborate for the fuming Price girl. "If you can't let the past go, you may never find peace and happiness, and I believe that you deserve that after all you've done for my daughter."

Sera paused and exhaled.

"I don't want you to be a different version of me…trapped by a past which determines the future," she finished, somewhat exhausted by this ordeal of a conversation.

Chloe stood there silent as she seemed to be in the midst of judging her friend's biological mother. She glanced at the counter and noticed the several Styrofoam food containers waiting for her. Sera nodded to them, and with that Chloe turned and gathered them under her arm and turned back.
"Thanks..." she murmured. "For the breakfast… and what you said."

Sera nodded and allowed a thin smile for the girl.

"I would be grateful if you kept all that to yourself. It's something I need to explain to her first hand…" she gently requested. "But please Chloe, could you tell Rachel I say hello?"

Chloe hesitated for a moment before she nodded as well. With a wave she turned around and started her journey towards the exit. But then she stopped as though she as conflicted.

Slowly, Chloe rounded back to face Sera again and joined her again.

"Look, Sera..." Chloe spoke, her voice almost guilty. "She'll never say this out loud, but she does call you 'Mom'. She won't say it to you, or Rose or James, but she does when we're together... and it's obvious to me that she trying to love you."

Sera could only blink. Rachel called her Mom?

She wished she had something to say, something she could do, but she could only stand there and watch her future daughter-in-law rub her neck like she was questioning whether or not it was right to say it.

"I'm not betraying her trust lightly," she murmured. "I just... thought you should know."

Sera smiled brightly, her hand rubbing the back of her neck as she struggled to continue the foreign sensation of joy washing over her. Rachel called her *Mom*. Her *daughter* called her *Mom*.

Still processing this new reality, Sera nodded firmly.

"I'll keep it to myself," she assured the girl. "Thank you Chloe… you cannot know how much this means to me."

"I don't, but I know it has to be hard," Chloe returned as she backed away from the elated mother. "Don't… you know… give up, will you?"

Through her watery eyes, Sera shook her head.

"Never," She swore.

Sharing one final look, Chloe left, leaving Sera to process the news and not break down into happy tears in front of the customers and her co-workers.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter went through a couple rewrites which caused a small delay. I hope you like.
Next chapter will take a bit longer (Possibly. I don't know)

Next Chapter: Rachel and Chloe test a theory.
True to her word, Chloe did not go beyond the surface of her conversations with Sera at the diner. She knew that she had to give something to Rachel. She had to have something if Rachel had encouraged the meeting; so she chose to only talk about Sera's apparent interest in how the two of them were defining themselves. That Sera was interested the affairs of the girls beyond that of a woman trying to reconnect with a child she lost.

Strangely, Rachel seemed almost pleased by this lack of answers she had sent Chloe out to answer on her behalf. She never passed up a good opportunity to tease Chloe, and so to find out her biological mother was like this as well, it must have brightened her up.

To be quite honest it must have been breath of fresh air.

With most of the interactions between Sera and Rachel an almost masochist affair, to find out Sera was capable of light conversations must have been refreshing. It seemed to give Rachel hope for the future. That they could one day just sit down once all the shit was squared away and just talk about things that weren't an exercise in self-destructive misery.

In the back of her own mind, Chloe wondered if that was Sera's plan all along: Offer her plausible deniability so that Rachel could have something to focus on while she and Chloe could keep the real conversation focal point to themselves. If that was going on, then there was a real spark of cleverness that had somehow survived though that hell she survived.

If she was being completely honest, she wasn't entirely certain if that was a good or bad thing. For now she was just grateful to be witness to a happy Rachel.

They arrived back to the Amber home that evening after a day spent chilling out and roaming Arcadia Bay like the listless teenagers were… or at least trying to be. The two of them had spent the time teasing, flirting and talking about anything and everything. Most notable of their conversations was travel.

They were both aware that they couldn't just fucking run off together like they thought they could. That was the end goal still, but the two of them came to a reluctant acceptance that the Bay was going to be the fixture of their life until they were out of school properly. When school was finally done fucking so long Arcadia Bay and hello to the next era of fun and excitement in the outside world, an era free of all the expectations others held for them.

While they were resigned to seeing through the last years of their prison sentence, that didn't mean they couldn't escape on a short term basis. They had agreed forever ago they'd open road it, but that didn't seem what Rachel wanted anymore; because Rachel now had a new fucking goal for them that Chloe really sort of wanted no part in.

**Seattle.**

As in Max Caulfield's Seattle.
Okay, so technically it was the same city, but in it still resided the one person that she didn't think she was capable of seeing. Yet here they were, discussing going to see her to try and settle things and make things right between them.

Rachel seemed hell bent on trying to fix Chloe's hang up for Max. "Renewal or closure" as she would put it; in her mind everything needed to be wrapped up neatly so that Chloe didn't have any sort of lingering doubts. In a few years they would escape, and they needed to have closure on everything. No matter how it turned out, Rachel said she'd have her back. She even offered to kick Max's ass if she got the word from Captain Chloe.

She wouldn't issue that order… but Max and Rachel catfighting… it had an appeal all in its own.

In spite of her… hesitations, Chloe felt a small… hope for encounter should it happen. Maybe things between Max and her could be fixed. The idea of Max, Rachel and her just chilling out and catching up was a growing fantasy she was having. She dared not speak about it in case it didn't turn out though. Life seemed to be a series of disappointments sprinkled with the occasional bright spot, which brought your hopes back up long enough just to plunge you back down into the shit.

Chloe gave her head a mental shake as. As Rachel put it, she was being an edge queen again.

For now, they had to focus on the day to day. Rachel was apparently talking to her Dad about leaving during the summer. With James making Chloe a promise that he would help expand on his daughter's freedom of movement, Rachel was going to start seeing just how committed he was to that promise; but with James helping her get the truck to street legal status, it seemed to her that he was coming around to that promise made what felt like an age ago.

Another aspect that hadn't been discussed was Sera. Rachel bailing for the summer meant the visits would have to be suspended. This was a factor Rachel hadn't factored in beforehand Chloe had brought it up.

Sera and Rachel had just started their reconnection, and the idea of just… suspending it seemed wrong to Chloe, whom Sera had only hours earlier told her that she feared Rachel suspending their encounters; but she had no say in the matter. Sera was fighting tooth and nail to have a small place in her daughter's heart, and she just had to respect that in spite of everything she did. She just hoped Rachel could appreciate that. If Rachel wanted to leave, then she needed to let Sera understand why.

Setting the peeler down, Chloe grabbed the kitchen knife off the cutting board and chunkified (Not a real word, whatever) the carrots for the green salad she was making for dinner. Rachel was upstairs, doing last moment studying for her finals, and with Chloe not having to deal with that, she intend volunteered to help Rose with dinner prep. It was kind of nice to be honest. With Mom, you just sort of got sick of the dinner style cooking after a while. Rose either took classes or had come from a family that passed these skills down... probably both frankly.

Rose had been the real eye opener in grace, patience and most of all humility. She had spent such a long time rueing the day Sera showed up on her doorstep. This much she had admitted to Chloe; but on the day of arrival, Rose took a step back and just accepted Sera entering their lives with little to no resistance (perhaps there was some resentment, but it was never openly expressed) and instead, she seemed to try to empathize where it was Sera was coming from. She didn't pity Sera, but she was instead attempting to understand, and that was all Sera seemed to need.

God, Chloe hoped one day she'd have that sort of strength. Although, with the way things were going with Rachel, it was looking like kids were not going to be a sticking point like it was for James and Sera, unless Chloe went out of her way to have one.
Probably not though; kids were terrible, and she would be a shit tiered mom.

The peace between Rose and Chloe was broken as outside the sound of her truck's horn being honked broke the silence of the evening. Chloe snapped her head up and looked at Rose, who was looking through the blinds.

"Were Rachel and you expecting a visitor tonight, Chloe?" Rose inquired curiously, a small frown forming on her face as the horn sounded again.

Chloe shook her head, her mouth curled up in a grimace. No... they weren't. It was just supposed to be a quiet night recovering from a heavy drinking session. Certainly not one where someone was in her vehicle hitting the fucking horn.

That was when a voice put a chill down her spine.

"Chloee..." she heard called out. "Chloee, I know you're hereeee!"

It was Eliot.

Eliot was here at the Amber home attempting to make some sort of scene.

Chloe was ready to kill the motherfucker.

Chloe slammed the kitchen knife down on the counter. As much as she wanted to bring it out there with her, she didn't want that mess against her name. She'd talk the fucking idiot down instead.

Fuck her pride and fuck Rachel's pride as well; it was time to get James involved in shutting this shitass down for fucking good. She fucking took pictures of Rachel's bruising from their last encounter while she was sleeping one night. It was a shady thing to do, but she watched enough cop shows to know that that was the only way to get someone to believe her.

"What's happening?" she heard Rose call to her as she stormed out of the kitchen.

"Rose... could you please call James?" Chloe called back to the Mother without looking. "I'll sort this out but there's shit we need to talk about."

Ignoring the fact she had forgotten to put on her shoes, Chloe pried the door open and stormed down the front steps to where sure enough Eliot Hampden was waiting for her by her truck. He was wearing an open dark wind jacket and jeans. He was dishevelled and swaying slightly with a stupid grin on his face like he was so fucking proud of himself. In other words, Eliot was hella fucking trashed and looking to start shit with her.

Or worse.

Rachel.

It had become evident over the past month that Eliot was the gasoline to Rachel's fire. The mere presence of him near either of them would set off a chain of events none of them would be able to walk away from unscarred; and that wasn't even factoring in James Amber, who was probably on the phone with Rose right now.

Chloe could only imagine the amount of shit James was going to pile on this little dumbass when the truth finally came out. James was ready to hurt his ex-wife to protect Rachel from even the wisp of a challenge from Sera, what in the fuck would he do to someone who physically assaulted his daughter?
"Eliot… what in the fuck are you doing here?" she hissed at him as she came to a full stop a few feet away. She didn't want to get any closer.

"Heyyy…” he sort of slurred back. "I… thought I'd drop by to see my old friend Chloe. Another school year down, not that it matters to you. Not that school ever seemed to matter to you."

There it was already; that condescending attitude, like he knew better for her than she did. Like as though somehow he was the only one looking out for her best interests.

As Eliot stepped forward, Chloe took a step back. She didn't want to look weak, but she wasn't going to be fucking stupid about it. All she had to do was hold him off long enough until James got home, or Eliot left. This was his last harassing her. Everything was going to tumble down on him soon enough.

Her real concern was Rachel.

She would be out here soon enough and the problem right now would escalate tenfold. Rachel would start in on him and know all the right buttons to push to drive Eliot in the state of rage. She was the consummate observer after all. By her own confession she admitted to watching his movements almost as much as she had Chloe's in the months leading up to them finally meeting officially.

It was, in her word, a 'fascinating study in beta orbiter habits'. Once upon a time, she might have thought that was a shitty thing to say about him, but after the parking lot incident, fuck him.

"I'll be back in school next year," she muttered back to him.

"Oh, hey look at that how generous she is!" Eliot said chuckling. "Amber must have really cried up a real storm. I guess eventually she tries to do the right thing after she exhausts everything else… or gets her daddy to do the hard work."

Like on cue, Rachel was standing in the doorway before Chloe could retort, her face contorted into an expression of terrible rage. She slammed the front door shut behind her and stormed towards Chloe and Eliot. It was enough to make the boy step back as Rachel planted herself next to Chloe.

"Get the fuck out of my yard, Hampden," she growled at him. "Didn't I say something to you about leaving her alone unless she says otherwise?"

Chloe stepped forward and placed herself back in front of Rachel, unblinking as she stared at her former friend. She was not about to risk the girl she… cared about.

"Rachel, get the fuck back into the house," she ordered the girl behind her. She wished she didn't have to be so terse, but it was the only way she could think of to drive the message hard into Rachel. If Chloe was issuing a command, then she was meaning business.

But Rachel wasn't having that. She remained locked in place, glaring at Hampden like the boy was nothing more than a disobedient rat… nothing more than human vermin. She looked ready to launch herself out of Chloe's way and at the guy. Eliot too looked around Chloe and examined Rachel carefully.

"Rachel, I'm actually… glad you're here," he admitted to her, squinting to focus on her. "You see… I've been sort of thinking things through and… I want you to know that I don't hate you. I kind of feel bad, really. You're fake but you clearly haven't had much of a choice about that. Have you?"

That was all it took. Rachel launched herself at him, but Chloe was too quick for her. She
intervened, grabbing Rachel tight around her body and stood there like a stump as the smaller girl struggled against her. The struggling ceased a lot faster than she expected. She felt the girl just sort of freeze right up in her arms. She was almost... limp.

Chloe released Rachel, who was wide eyed and turned back to find herself staring down a pistol Eliot clutched in one hand. Silver, black grip revolver. It looked like something out of fucking Dirty Harry. Well... maybe not that big.

The revolver was shaking in Eliot's hand. Like he was having second thoughts but he was committed to this.

"Dude... Eliot..." Chloe breathed faintly. "Why do you have a gun?"

Eliot sort of huffed out a small laugh.

"All... all the part of the plan, Chloe."

Eliot shifted himself taking a shooter's stance, or at least it seemed like that. Guns were never really her thing beyond a couple video games she played when she was young. This was real. This was so real she felt physically sick as Rachel and she were now silently staring at the weapon in the drunk teen's hand. Just dangling there at his side like it was a casual fucking thing.

"See... I got this... plan to prove it to you," he started to elaborate. "Chloe, I love you... I-fucking love you, and I... get that you don't love me... and after tonight, you'll never probably want to see me again... but I don't want to see you hurt by her. So I'm here to prove everything to you."

Rachel took a step forward. Her rage was gone, replacing it was an expression of almost... compassion for the guy she resented so much. She did not know if it was real or an act, but whatever it was it startled Eliot. Chloe reached out to try to stop her from moving forward, but Rachel batted her hand away and issued her a warning look.

"Eliot, please listen to what I have to say to you," Rachel spoke slowly. "I respect that you want to... protect... her. I'm not a saint. But I'm not going to hurt Chloe either. I'm never going to hurt her."

Eliot shifted his weight to his right leg, the revolver now aimed squarely at Rachel's chest. He honestly looked half asleep. He certainly seemed sleep deprived.

"You will hurt her though... don't you get it? It's just what you are. It's what you come from," Eliot murmured back, almost sympathetic to her. "I know your secret you two have... You watched me for such a long time, so I returned the favour. You spend your days hanging out with a junkie mom and you still try and pretend to think that the sort of disease she is hasn't just been passed down to you? Like... intergenerational rot..."

Eliot shook his head sadly as the girls processed Eliot admitting to stalking them perhaps the whole past month. He... knew about Sera? What in the fuck was Eliot Hampden up to? How long was this going on for...?

"No..." he said, breaking them away from their combined focus on his implication. "Self-preservation is in your blood. It's who you are. You won't risk yourself.... and I think I know how to prove it."

Eliot directed the gun at Chloe right between her eyes. He looked... awful. It was as though he genuinely didn't want to do this... like he thought that there was no other option but to do this. The
alcohol flowing him only fuelled his twisted conviction that somehow he was going to save her from Rachel. None of this made any sense to anyone but him.

Rachel didn't even hesitate. She stepped forward, pushing Chloe back, one hand gripping on the front of Chloe's shirt as though seeking support. She stood there silent as the grave as she looked at the Eliot, waking for him to finally see that all of this was so fucking pointless.

As fearless as she seemed, Chloe knew otherwise. She could feel Rachel's shaking through the hand that gripped her. It reverberated through her body. Rachel was terrified, and Rachel was proud. Two things that shouldn't mix were combined and they were fuelling her determination not to take any shit from Eliot Hampden. She was a paper tiger; but she was still technically a child. Chloe was in no better position than she was. Rachel and her were only standing up thanks to the adrenaline and fear flowing through them.

Eliot blinked as his fucking stupid plan started tumbling down around him. He pulled the hammer back, the click made Rachel visibly twitch in spite of her stance. He didn't take pleasure in it. He looked almost as troubled as the girls he held at gunpoint.

It was a detail that did not go unmissed by Rachel even in the state of her absolute fear she was in. She leaned forward, her teeth gritted, her forehead nearly pressed against the barrel of the revolver. 

"Fucking do it, tough guy..." Rachel egged him on.

That was... not quite what either Chloe or Eliot had expected...

"What did you hope to accomplish here? Prove she was bad by being worse?" Chloe cut out in front of Rachel, hoping to curtail her from further escalation. "Just... give me the gun... and fucking leave. I have to tell James about you being here, but we'll hide the gun... this part of the conversation will be like it never happened, right Rachel?"

Rachel didn't answer her at all. Although she didn't read minds, it didn't that to know that Rachel was plotting murder against Eliot.

As furious as Rachel was, Eliot seemed to slowly come to his senses, and even as fucking drunk as he was, he was not stupid enough not to realize Chloe was offering him an out to this mess. Chloe meant it too. She had enough on him to get him booted from school if James did the right sort of arm twisting. Having the boy sent to jail... seemed overkill.

All it would take now was to get Rachel onboard. An impossible task now, but once Eliot just fucking left, she would settle down... hopefully. In spite of this entire mess, seeing Rachel standing there in front of her, protecting her... it was so fucking hot in a pissing your pants sort of way. She would never forget this and never want to have it happen ever again.

Hesitating for a moment longer, Eliot lowered the gun, leaving it dangling at his side. He did not hand it over, but was a start.

"What the fuck am I doing...? Why did I think some fucking dyke was worth this...?" Eliot spat out, his hand rubbing is face furiously as he laughed in incredulously. He glanced to Rachel and added. "I wish you the best of fucking luck with the used and damaged goods. You're going to need it."

That was all it took. Rachel fucking snapped.

They say that time slowed down as the adrenaline overflowed. Not for Chloe, it was all a blur that was barely coherent. She was frozen in place as she watched Rachel strike out, kneeing Eliot hard
in the stomach. She shoved him backwards. He stumbled back, raising the gun again.

The door opened suddenly, surprising Rachel and Chloe.

Worst of all startled was Eliot. The heavily intoxicated and winded boy swung the gun wildly and fired a single deafening shot off in the direction of the door.

As the shot rang out and all the hatred between Rachel and Eliot ceased in that moment as the three of them looked, deafened by the shot, all them strained by the smell of gunpowder flowing from the barrel of the pistol. Eliot had lowered to his side as a grotesque expression of horror crossed over his face.

There, lying in the doorway was Rose Amber.

Motionless…

Silent…

Gone…

That was when time seemed to take a terrible lurch. It took what felt like forever as all three of them attempted to process what had just happened. What they were looking at was an end. It seemed so impossible… so fucking unlikely… But there it was…

There she was…

It was Rachel who came around first of the three of them. She screamed the most terrible high pitched tone Chloe had ever heard in her life. She broke out of Chloe's grasp, ignoring gun and Eliot as she clambered away from them and towards Rose. Her legs buckled and failed on her. Rachel collapsed into the hard walkway, face-planting the concrete and splitting open her forehead. She ignored it as she stumbled forward, forcing herself back to her feet until she could finally collapse where her mother lain.

With her own rage boiling over her limits of self-control, Chloe turned back and tackled him to the ground, wrestling the pistol out of his grasp. Eliot did not offer up any sort of resistance. He was in a state of absolute shock as Chloe scooped up the pistol and held it over the boy. She did not even know if she was doing it right, but it felt right.

"I'm sorry..." Eliot sobbed the wave of guilt washing over the teenager. "I'm so sorry, Chloe... I just wanted to scare you... I just wanted to show you-"

He wasn't apologizing to Rachel.

He was apologizing to her.

'FUCK YOU!' Chloe shrieked at him, kicking the bastard in his side as hard as she could.

Pain shot through her body as she felt her bare toes crack against Eliot's ribs. She ignored the pain the best she could as she fell down and pushed the pistol into the back of Eliot's head.

It would be so fucking easy…

She looked up to see neighbours approaching. A middle aged man and his wife came running from their house towards them, screaming something that wasn't registering to her on any level. Where in the fuck were they moments ago when they needed them?
She calmed down just enough to stop contemplating shooting him.

"CALL 911!" she screamed at them like a girl possessed as they ran over to her over. "FOR FUCK'S SAKE CALL 911!"

As the woman got out her phone and the man dropped his full weight down on the boy, Chloe stumbled back in a daze, the gun dangling limply between her fingers, watching as Eliot sobbed incoherently as he realized his life was never going to be the same. This was fucking... how... fucking how could this have happened...

"CHLOE?!" she heard cut through the incoherence of her own thoughts. "CHLOE I NEED YOUR HELP!"

Rachel...

Dropping the gun in the grass, Chloe hobbled as quickly as she could, ignoring the crunch inside her foot as every move elicited more and more pain shooting through her. Fuck pain... and fuck her.

She fell down next to Rachel and took in the sight. Rose laid there in a pool of murky, almost black blood, her smart phone still in hand, her eyes half open and her mouth agape as though she was locked in a permanent state of surprise. Blood was trickling out her mouth, nose and ears. Like her heart had stopped pumping and what was flowing was just leftovers.

She was dead.

It was a fact Rachel refused to believe.

Rachel was just fucking... out of it. She was dazed, confused and even almost hopeful as though she thought she had a handle on it. Both of Rachel hands were covering the Rose's face, in an attempt to stop the bleeding from the wound. Her hands and arms soaked in her mother's blood. Her face was stained as well, like she had been hugging her mother.

Rachel leaned forward, her sweat drenched forehead touching against her mom's as she seemed to whisper incoherent encouraging words in an attempt to wake up. There was no way Chloe could say anything that would make any of this better.

Instead, Chloe reached out and pressed her hands against Rachel's back. Rachel stiffened up and turned back to look at her.

Gone was the hope and delusional optimism. There was no word that Chloe knew that could describe the devastation Rachel wore on her face as she turned back and looked up to Chloe with pleading eyes. Looking as though Chloe could somehow fix this like she had in the past.

"Chloe..." she begged her friend, her entire body quivering as she struggled to keep her voice clear and coherent. "You gotta tell me what to do... Please, she has to be okay... please help me... help her... you know what to do.... I need her so much, Chloe... I-I can't lose her... I love her... I love her, I love..."

Rachel grabbed Chloe's hands, revealing the quarter sized hole that had been punched through just below Rose's right eye. Blood and skull fragments pushing out of the wound like a vacuum.

Ignoring it the best she could, Rachel brought Chloe's hands down over and together they clutched onto the wound. Rachel and her did everything together... why should this have been any different?
Together they were stained in the blood of a mother who had died for no reason other than their fucking pride. Her blood was on their hands in every fucking way that mattered. Chloe remained still for a moment, before she wrenched her hands off Rose.

Ignoring the urge to get sick, she wrapped her bloodstained hands around Rachel and wrenched her off, eliciting a howling shriek that brought tears immediately to Chloe's eyes. As she continued to scream, she forced her friend's head into her chest so that she couldn't look at her mother anymore. Chloe ignored the fists striking her in vain as she held the girl back.

"I'm sorry, Rachel… I'm sorry…" was all Chloe could breathe to the friend now trapped in a waking nightmare.

All Rachel could do was scream her desperate hopelessness into the night.

Chapter End Notes

...  
...

To build, you must destroy. Wish this didn't happen, but there are reasons to the madness that will reveal itself in good time.

For what it's worth, stick around. We have only scratched the surface of this story and it's only starting to get interesting now. Thanks for reading, your patience with my shit disturbing, all your kind words and I hope to see you in the next chapter.

Next Chapter: James grieves as Chloe dreams.
James Amber had heard his wife die.

It had been a peculiar phone call to start with. Rose called him, asking him to come home. Chloe Price had been in some sort of a panic and had asked Rose to call him in order to get him home as soon as possible.

The last thing she said was 'I'm going to see what's happening, I'll tell him to leave. Deal with it when everyone has cooler heads.'

He heard the shot only a few moments later. He heard her fall, he heard his daughter scream, he heard Rachel pleading as she struggled to save her Mom, he heard Chloe screaming for a paramedic, he heard Rachel screaming even harder as Chloe tried to comfort her. In a few short minutes he heard the death of his wife and the death of what innocence his daughter and Chloe Price had left.

As the report of a shooting came into the DA's office came in, the building got eerily silent. It was as though everyone was drawing straws to come into James' office and tell him what they knew, when he already knew and probably knew more than they had. He had only lingered long enough to collect himself. He knew what he was walking into, and he had to be stronger than most.

In the end, it was his ADA Lauren Tomlinson who came in to give the word that there had been a shooting. He watched her face contort into horror as all he said was: "I already know Lauren, thank; I heard Rose die..." in a tone that was almost as though he was discussing the weather.

He hated that it must have sounded heartless, but he couldn't just break down and weep. Being a machine was the only coping mechanism that worked for him. It worked when he had to fall out of love with Sera, it worked when he tried murderers and child rapists and it would have to work now as he came to terms with everything that had happened... after he failed to protect his own family.

Tomlinson insisted on driving him over. That was fine; James wasn't sure if he exactly remembered how to drive at the moment. His brain overloaded with so many questions and regrets which he would likely never get an answer to. He remained silent as the grave as Tomlinson attempted to convey the grief she held for the situation. She and Rose had been friends since Tomlinson had joined the office. That was Rose, always able to make friends...

The house was chaos as they arrived. Neighbours were gathered around behind yellow tape, all of them looking to him as he bended under the line silently made his way up to the front door, where Rose lain covered up in a tarp. His eyes flickered to the gun and to the Police car where the shooter sat.

Sitting there being processed on the scene was the boy he had seen the day he got Wells to reinstate Chloe Price into school.

He should have... should took it seriously.

He had to turn away as the boy started to weep. He had to ignore the urge to grab the gun he left
behind and fire every round in the chamber into the kid's chest. He instead directed his attention back to his wife and the one thing he needed to know the most: Where was Rachel and Chloe?

The answer became obvious the moment he stepped over his wife's body and examined the house. Just about everything that could be broken, was broken; ransacked by Rachel in a fit of utter rage. He couldn't blame her.

James noticed the blood trail and asked the first officer on scene… Berry something… he said that Rachel had accidentally slashed her wrist open with a porcelain shard of a vase she had broken with her arm. Rachel now in the hospital getting stitched up and placed observation, which was just a polite way of saying suicide watch. Chloe also was there for three broken toes and a twisted ankle she sustained cracking the Hampden kid's rib. She had stopped Rachel's bleeding and raised a furious hell at the attending physicians to keep her from being separated from Rachel.

James had never felt more grateful in his life to have a pissed off semi-punk girl on his side.

He didn't go to the hospital right away. He instead lingered until the county medical examiner came to pick up Rose. After getting the all clear from the detectives, he pulled the tarp off his wife and sat there quickly in the doorway in the pool of blood with her, his hands clutching onto her cooling bloodstained hand. He felt as lifeless as Rose was, and yet somehow he lingered on. Everything he had built had been destroyed by a child with a gun and a stupid, chilish plan that somehow made sense to him.

How did it come to this?

Answers were important, but it was something he could not focus on for long. Not when he was so close to tears in the plain view of the ABPD and his neighbours. So he instead spoke to her as much as he could without breaking down, but mostly he remained silent until the examiner arrived. He helped the doctor move his wife and held onto her hand as long as it took to get his Rose into the van.

Changing his blood drenched trousers out of professional courtesy; James got a ride from Officer Berry to the hospital. ADA Tomlinson wanted to give him a ride, but she was in charge of the case, and she had a job to focus on. Besides, he didn't think he could handle anymore of her attempts to console him.

When he arrived at the hospital, he had already gotten a mob of people waiting for him. Some were from the local and state news, but more importantly then the vultures were the dozen cops and countless firefighters - who were attempting to control the forest fire which had caught a second wind and roared back to life - at his side. All of them were attempting to convey their loyalty to him and to Rachel through this terrible time.

As touched as he was by it, he just couldn't give a shit about it. His wife was dead and nothing these well intentioned men and women in uniform could say would help him.

Although he had to recuse himself from the case and let ADA Tomlinson take the over the investigation he was thankful to find that the people in his office were not jerking him around too much. They kept him updated minute by minute as he asked. It kept him busy as he sat outside Rachel and Chloe's hospital room, letting his daughter and her friend sleep. No detail of the case thus far was spared as far as he could tell, but the details were steadily more and more disturbing as the life of Eliot Hampden came to life for him.

On the surface, the boy seemed a straight arrow. A top tier student on a full scholarship ride; but a search warrant executed within an hour of the shooting had already turned up a trove of disturbing
writings involving an obsession for Chloe Price and growing hatred for Rachel's new place in her life.

It seemed Rachel had come to be his greatest obstacle between Chloe and his friendship. Her mere presence had, in his mind, driven a wedge between them apparently. For Hampden it was unforgivable that Chloe Price was into someone. He did not want to share her, as though she were his property.

From what he saw of the pictures his guys sent him, the literature Hampden was writing was grim; each piece of writing somehow more disturbing than the previous. They started as odes to obsessive love and by the end turned into murderous fantasies.

It wasn't long before they shifted away the focus from Chloe and instead onto Rachel. All of them involved steadily more menacing fantasies of the brutalization and slow death of his daughter in her role for the disintegration of his relationship with Chloe.

As bad as it was, as much as he already wanted to bury the little shit somewhere out of the way, finding out that the boy was breaking into the Price house somehow found a way to make it worse.

The extensive search of the dorm uncovered a trove personal effects belonging to Chloe of all shapes and varieties. The little creep had stolen back the notes he wrote to her, ticket stubs to concerts they went to, junk that seemed to have no significance beyond something he found in Chloe's room, and then they found her clothing… her undergarments... it was so unbelievably fucking weird…

It was about three hours into the investigation before the DA office got a visitor. It was Terrence Albright, a local defense attorney that Hampden's family had already hired.

He wasn't a slimy defense lawyer who crawled out of the woodwork like a cockroach; he had a reputation as someone who was realistic to his clients. He informed the office his client was prepared to take a guilty plea to avoid a potential twenty year sentence he was up for when the charge of first degree manslaughter was handed out. As much as he hated the little fuck, he hated the idea of having to have Rachel and Chloe called before a judge to testify. He just wanted the sentence passed down quick and quiet.

With Albright and the DA's office agreeing on figuring out a sentence plus whatever the Judge would add on, Albright did give up one caveat of information which saved the team the effort of tracking the serial number on the .40 calibre Smith & Wesson revolver used in the shooting.

The weapon belonged to one David Madsen: an out of work Iraq War veteran and was currently residing in the Price household as Joyce's boyfriend.

Madsen was been brought into the station for questioning as per SOP. He had all the legal paperwork for a concealed carry licence, so there was no reason to hold him. He was apparently distraught as his weapon was brought out and the situation was explained to him. He explained that the weapon had gone missing on Saturday and had assumed that it had been Chloe who had taken it once it was clear it was missing.

Hearing that… James was prepared to go down to the station and kick his fucking teeth in. Or at least try to. Madsen was the combat vet, not him.

It wasn't like he had to wait for long to see him though. Joyce had come to the hospital to see Chloe. She was red eyed from crying. She spoke to him but he was in autopilot mode. He was capable of issuing basic responses to her, but he had no focus to pay attention, but he would at a
later date. For now the only thing he could notice was Madsen being unable to look him in the eye. While he might not have played a role in the death, he provided the means.

With all this information now out in the open and Rachel and Chloe next on the list to be questioned, he asked Lauren to hold off bringing in Chloe to talk about Hampden. He felt a certain… obligation to her to explain the situation. She deserved to know how it all unfolded in a safe environment and from someone who she knew. Fucked if he knew just how to explain it to her though… sixteen year olds shouldn't have to witness murders, and on top of that have a stalker who committed the act.

Chloe was in a place no better than Rachel was having watched Rose die as well, with her being the primary motivation of the Hampden boy's actions. Worst yet was the way he heard his daughter beg her as though somehow she held the answers to save Rose. In her grief, Rachel unbeknownst placed an unbearable burden on her friend.

Chloe… needed to know this was not her fault. She needed to have that sort of absolution because Rachel was going to need her in a way James would never be able to provide to her.

"James?"

James looked up from the floor and found the small form of Sera Gearhardt standing several feet away. She looked as though she too was barely composed. Although she might not have spent a significant amount of time with, Rose she too could feel grief for the woman.

Rubbing his face, James pulled himself out of his seat and slowly approached his former wife. Sera had become the biggest question mark in the life he was slowly attempting to salvage in the wake of what had happened. With Rose gone, who did Rachel have left to fill the void? Should it even be filled? Would Sera understand that Rose's death changed nothing about their arrangement?

While every sense in him told him he was correct in not feeling obligated to expand her role in Sera's life, a growing thought was taking form. Maybe… maybe it would not be so bad to expand her role. Only if she was ready for it; she might have had her problems, but she had experiences that he could never begin to have.

"I'm sorry I did not come sooner," she said as she stepped forward towards him, her hands fidgeting. "I had a graveyard shift and… and… James, this shouldn't have happened... certainly not to her."

James nodded curtly. He couldn't find any words to offer her; but thankfully Sera did not seem to mind. Instead she took another step forward and tentatively reached out to touch his forearm. He remained silent as he looked down at her.

"How are you doing…" she continued, her voice gently prodding him to reply. "Rachel isn't the only one who matters in this…"

He could not look at her in the eye. Her eyes held sway over him even fifteen years later and all the pain they inflicted on each other. One look from her, and James would spill everything he needed to say but couldn't. He laughed privy to the fact at how absurd all of this was.

"The only way I'm coping is trying to be a DA… then I remember I'm now on the other side of the justice system, and I start to have a goddamn panic attack…" he admitted, still adverting his eyes from her silent inquisition. "I don't… know what I'm going to do, Sera… I haven't felt this out of control since…"
The words remain unspoken, but Sera and James knew exactly what he was referring to. His life after Sera had been one of careful control and managing. His unspoken partner in this was Rose, who had the exact sort of drive and ambition as he had. Now that she was… was gone, he was all alone again, and there he was standing in arms-length of the woman who brought Rose and him together.

"I... I need to get some fresh air..." he muttered blankly. "C-could you... you know... go and sit with her?"

He looked as Sera cast her eyes at the hospital room Rachel and Chloe were asleep in. She bit her lip and nodded before she turned back to James. Silently, she dug into her purse and retrieved a pack of cigarettes and lighter and offered it to him.

James stared at them for a moment before he reached out and took them from Sera. As much as he wanted to honour Rose's distaste for smoking, he would hope she could forgive him for this lapse. He just... needed to decompress.

"Thank you..." he murmured to her as he slipped the pack into his pocket.

Sera nodded and the two of them remained still. He did his utmost not to pay attention to Joyce Price sitting a ways off with Madsen, just silently watching the interaction between Sera and him. It wasn't helped when Sera stepped forward and pulled her ex-husband into a tight hug. It was so different from how it was in the past. Age and regret had turned her furious passion into a timid fragility.

She let go of him and stepped back. Silently she brushed by him, her fingertips touching his wrist as she approached the hospital room, leaving James alone.

"James?" he heard her call out towards him.

James turned back and found Sera looking at him carefully, her head sort of tilted as she seemed to struggle with just what to say to a man who inadvertently fuelled her misery for so long.

"I'm... not just here for Rachel. I'm here for you as well," she reaffirmed to him gently. "If you need anything at all, I want to be there to help you."

Grateful for the offer, but too numb to offer his gratitude, he could only stand there. Sera seemed to understand, she issued him a small smile and turned away and entered the hospital room.

James returned back to his lonely isolated misery.

Just as he deserved.

...

...

*Chloe was back in her dreams. Sitting alone in the back of Dad's old car was a dead giveaway.*

*Usually in these chats he was there, driving along the same stretch of highway she had come to hate. But instead, the car was parked outside of the Amber house, which was in flames. Chloe climbed out of the car and slowly made her way up to the front steps. There was no heat or smoke radiating from the fire as she approached the flames. It was unnatural and ferocious, and so utterly unstoppable.*
Sure enough, he was there. There sitting on the front steps, unperturbed by the fire was her Dad. He was not alone by the looks of it. Unlike how he always seemed to be waiting for her, he was in a deep conversation with the second figure.

She walked up the front steps in an utter daze, following the trail of blood leading to the two apparitions. The scent of iron and death caught her attention and she looked down to find her clothing drenched in blood. It ran down her shirt and stuck to her like she had jumped into a pool with her clothing on. It weighed her down and made each step agonizingly heavier.

Yet still she marched on like a good soldier to face her judgement.

There were other figures that faded into this dreamscape. Shapeless wisps of smoke. The only one to take shape had been her father but she felt like these forms were watching her. She had to wake up; she had to wake up as soon as she could.

As she approached her Dad, she listened to him chuckle to the second person before he finally redirected his attention solely to his daughter. Dad smiled that smile which always made Chloe feel better; but not this time. She didn't want to be here. She wanted to be awake and at Rachel's side. She wanted to be able to sleep without these horrors casually playing inside her mind.

"Hello sweetheart. It's been a while," Dad greeted her with the warmth that sent a shiver through her. "I almost thought you might have outgrown your old Dad…"

Chloe wiped the mist out of her eyes and shook her head furious at the suggestion.

"Never," she reaffirmed. She knew he was teasing, but even a joke was impossible not to feel so strongly about.

The second figure pushed back her long, bloodied dark hair and turned to face Chloe as well. It was Rose, her skin grey and pallid from being drained of her blood, her face hideously twisted and broken from the bullet Eliot had put through her. Her eye socket was unnaturally pushed to one side and was hanging lower than the other.

Like Dad, Rose too was smiling comfortingly. Her blood stained teeth bared as though everything was okay.

But everything was not okay.

Chloe was not at all fucking comforted right now.

"Well Chloe," Rose reverberated out, her vocal pitch strange and off. "Now is it this super awkward?"

"Rose… I'm so sorry," she sobbed out. "Dad can you… fix her face…?"

Dad sort of smiled like it was an amusing suggestion.

"Only you can do that if you feel you're able to forgive yourself."

She couldn't forgive herself. She had been the cause of this insurmountable grief inflicted against Rachel and James. She knew that there was something wrong with Eliot, that he had already hurt Rachel, and yet she held off until the last moment to get the proper people involved. She allowed her devotion to Rachel, her desire to please her get in the way of the right thing and now Rose had paid for it.
She didn't deserve forgiveness… she didn't deserve the friendship had with Rachel. She didn't deserve Rachel period.

"Pride and ego are a dangerous combination, Chloe Price," Rose spoke, her words stuttering and broken. "I hope that this real life lesson will be the shock the two of you need right now. Death has a way of bringing about a renewal; with… vigilance further death could be averted. I am the warning shot across the bow, I am chemotherapy. I am the near unendurable scorching agony that averts the slow rot of cancer. My death must be the vehicle of change. Or the cycle will repeat, and you will be the next victim to this..."

Chloe didn't understand a single word, everything was a vague mess of things, but she supposed that was what her mind must have been right about now. A collection of fractured thoughts and fuelled by a terrible concoction of guilt, self-loathing and grief. Still, perhaps there were answers to be had… from a more reliable source.

She turned to face her dad again.

"Why did this happen, Dad?" she pleaded him weakly, her voiced so she did not cry. "You gotta know... I should know."

Dad nodded.

"You do know," he confirmed for her. "The answer is in you right now."

"Buried deep..." Rose echoed.

"...Forgotten in your loss..." Dad continued. "A treasure hidden by little pirates what feels like so long ago."

Dad gestured off to the front yard. Chloe turned and found two figures materialized before her eyes. Standing there was her... her at 14 years old. She was looking down on a second figure; she was sitting on the grass crying, her hands covering her eyes.

Chloe felt her stomach lurch as she stepped forward towards Max Caulfield.

As she tried to approach her, Chloe only managed three steps before her legs locked. She gasped and tried to move. She needed to see Max; she needed to speak to her childhood friend now more than ever. She needed to hear her voice, she needed to hug her and ask her to be her friend again. Whatever she did to cause Max to ghost her, she was utterly sorry for. She didn't know what she did, but she was sorry for it regardless.

But she couldn't have that chance.

Instead she had to feel the overwhelming jealousy as he younger self stepped forward and helped Max up to her feet. They shared words Chloe could not hear; they hugged and held onto each other that twisted a knot into her stomach. She needed Max. She needed her first mate more than ever. She hated her younger version. She was so ignorant, so blind to the truth. She had to only look over to Chloe to see what she would be come.

"Words they say are cheap," she heard her father speak behind her as Chloe held her eyes on Max and her younger self. "But words that are meant –words which are truly abided to - have a power that can affect the entire world; and there are words you once heard that you have held yourself to ever since Rachel entered your life..."

Another figure took form. Leaning against Dad's car was James, a cigarette between his fingertips.
Chloe knew he was just an apparition, but that didn't make her feel any less ashamed at the widower her inaction had created. He stared at her impassively, like he seemed to be inspecting her. He seemed to be judging to see if she was worth his time.

She wasn't worth his time. All his painstaking efforts to save her had led to the death of his wife and the destruction of his way of life. She deserved only his bitter scorn from here on out.

It was all her fault…

James took a drag of his cigarette and silently he approached Chloe and the ghost adults.

"Holding yourself to promises has consequences, Chloe Price…" James warned her softly, that steady tone of his freaking her out more than anything else in this lucid dream.

"Every action…" Rose interjected.

"…A magnificent and terrible reaction…" Dad interjected over her.

Chloe felt a heavy hand fall on her shoulder. Dad was standing up now. It was enough to force her attention away from the sobbing figure of Max Caulfield, who remained in her best friend's arms. Chloe looked up into his serious eyes.

"Everything teeters on the edge of collapse, Chloe," Dad spoke again. "Everything in our lives is so fragile that even words you hold yourself to can lead to total shifts in everything."

"Destiny is a lie. Predestination is a ruse. There is no set course," James continued over her dad. "These silent vows you have committed to have seen to a change your path, but there are always-"

James was cut off as a wispy apparition formed right in front of Chloe's eyes.

Standing there now in front of her was Sera Gearhardt, in the deepest throes of her heroin addiction. She was an emaciated looking skeleton, her hair limp and patchy, skin covered in scars and burns and track marks with gangrene forming around the holes. She opened her mouth to reveal a set of rotten and missing teeth.

"Unforeseen variations," Sera rasped to her, her boney sickly fingers gripping Chloe's skin. "These are terrible unknowns that come from such drastic alterations."

Chloe wretched her head out of Sera's grasp and took a step back from the three newcomers.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do about this, Dad…" she murmured to her dad.

"That's a dollar in the swear jar!"

Chloe turned around and found her younger self was standing there with a stupid fucking smirk on her face like she was just so fucking clever. She wanted to smack the Max hogging stupid across the mouth. Gritting her teeth at the cunt, Chlow turned back to face the four adults.

"Are you speaking to Rachel?" she pointlessly asked her own manifestations like somehow the girls shared a link.

James naturally was the one to step forward past both his wives.

"Rachel dreams of fire and death now…" he stated to her. "You must play a role in forcing her back."
"You must be brave. Braver then you have ever been before," Sera spoke next.

"Resist following down her downward spiral; pull her back from this abyss. Show her life can be beautiful again," Rose pleaded, hers touching Chloe's shoulder.

"Resist the beautiful self-destruction she can wrought on you," Sera spoke again. "Love yourself enough to say no to her."

The sound of a semi-truck horn blasted out of nowhere. Near the still sobbing Max, the final spirit materialized.

Standing there was Eliot Hampden engulfed in fire and armed with his revolver. He staggered forward, his eyes locked on Chloe's with a mania that reached an inhuman evil. Eliot paused, only for a moment. He raised the gun and executed Max Caulfield on the spot.

Even if it was all inside her head, even if she knew it was a dream, she screamed out as she watched her friend die. Undisturbed by the execution, Dad stepped forward to her. He was smiling as he reached out to touch his horrified little girls' cheek.

"Save her to save you, sweetheart..." were his final words to her.

He let go of her silently walked away past Eliot who stood behind the Ambers and quietly shot Rose, James and Sera in that order. Each body collapsed and bled out. Chloe tried not to watch, but she could not help herself. She looked up and found her Dad leaning against the car, smiling as bright lights hit him.

"Dad... I need to go... I need to wake up now... Please just let me wake up!" she pleaded him as the horn rang out again. It was much closer this time. "I need to fucking wake up... I can't see this again..."

Her request was denied by him. The semi-truck came roaring out of know where, tearing her father and the car apart in one swoop. She stood there, too stunned to scream or cry. She was just... dead to all this misery.

At least until she heard a small laugh behind her. Chloe rounded back and found younger Chloe standing there, grinning like she saw the funniest thing ever.

"Too bad about that idiot," younger Chloe giggled. "But you still owe another dollar in the swear jar!"

True to her word, Chloe reared her hand right behind her head and brought it down hard onto the child, back handing her younger self's mouth so hard the girl fell to the pavement in front of her.

"SWEAR JAR THAT YOU STUPID LITTLE USELESS FAILURE OF A HUMAN BEING, FUCKING BITCH!" she shrieked at herself. Her words expelling so hard out of her that they burned her lung and throats as if she had swallowed a lit cigarette.

The child looked up at her. She did not speak or smile. Standing over her was Eliot. Young Chloe seemed almost... happy. Like the others, Eliot fired a round through the top of young Chloe's head, her orifices exploding out a geyser of murky blood.

It was just burning Eliot and Chloe now amidst the bodies. Eliot looked... satisfied through he flames that engulfed him. Chloe was all his now, no one was left to get in his way. He leaned inwards, his lips nearly touching hers.
"It was all you, Chloe," he breathed to her. "It was only for you…"

Eliot raised the pistol placed the barrel into his mouth and leaned in nice and close.

Without further hesitation, he squeezed the trigger.

…

…

Chloe woke up with a violent heave.

It took a moment to realize she was back in the real world again; but as reality returned to her, she didn't know if that was better or worse. Rose was still dead, and she was in a hospital bed next to Rachel, who was currently in a drug induced sleep, and the blame was still squarely on her.

She rubbed her eyes and tried not to think of poor Rose, the woman whom her inactions had killed. She should have done something, said something… but she didn't and now she was gone and it was her fault.

"Bad dreams?" she heard from the corner of the hospital room.

Chloe rolled her head and found Sera was sitting there, her expression exhausted and upset by the situation. Chloe nodded as she sat up from her bed and pulled herself to the edge so that she could stand up and get some blood back into her legs.

"The worst," she confirmed to her, her voice miserable. "…I'm happy you are here though, Sera…"

She wasn't lying or trying to boost the older woman's ego. She was genuinely happy to see Sera. She was probably the only person left who probably understood the amount of pain she was in knowing that her deceptions had destroyed this family again. She was happy to see Sera healthy as opposed to the horrifying visage of her dream variation. She could not wish that on her worst enemy.

Well, except for Eliot…

"Likewise, Chloe," Sera agreed, breaking her from returning back into a state of self-perpetuated hatred. "For you and Rachel to be unhurt… it's a miracle. I wish I had a better word, but it's all I have."

Unable to feel the same, silently, Chloe hobbled over to the edge of Rachel's bed. She reached out; gently pushing Rachel's mussed hair back behind her ear. In her sleep she looked so peaceful. She was not dreaming of the day's events.

Chloe supposed that she would have her nightmares come to her in reality instead…

Ignoring the rules Rachel and her had about keeping their public displays of affections on the down low; Chloe leaned forward and kissed Rachel twice. Once on her forehead, the other on the edge of her lips in full view of Sera. She tried to ignore the growing fear that his would be the last time she would get to do this. Once Rachel woke up and realized this had all happened because of her, she would never trust Chloe again…

"James is outside, so is your mother and her boyfriend," Sera spoke up again as her guilt returned in droves. "James needs to speak to you. Do you… need anything first?"
Chloe turned back to face Rachel's last mother.

"Take care of her, Sera… she going to need you so much now…" she requested, to which Sera smiled and nodded.

Chloe paused for a moment.

Might as fucking well…

"…and I could use a hug," she amended quickly to the woman. "Rachel keeps fucking bragging you give comfy hugs… and I want to try it out…"

A small smile broke out on Sera's pained expression. She stepped forward, her arms outstretched to the girl.

Chloe bit her lip at the unconditional offer of affection even in the face of her own failure and launched herself word. She buried her head into Sera's shoulder; her arms grabbed the older woman by her waist. Sera chuckled softly as she placed her own arms carefully around Chloe's back.

"…Consider yourself on the Sera hug list, Chloe," Sera spoke idly as one hand reached up to stroke her hair. "Whenever you need one, I'm happy to oblige…"

Letting go of Sera, Chloe wiped her eyes and nodded. She stepped back and silently pushed herself slowly to the door. She glanced back and found Sera was sitting on the edge of Rachel's bed, gently running her fingers through her daughter's hair.

Sera was going to have her work cut out for her. Chloe hoped she was ready… and if she wasn't Chloe would help her all that she could. Rachel needed all everyone now.

As soon as Chloe closed the hospital room door behind her, a flash of reddish blonde hair which blinded her as Chloe's body stopped belonging to her. Chloe had found herself now being smothered to death by her openly weeping Mom. Douchebag was a ways off. He looked as though he was unable to look her in the eyes. She didn't give a fuck about him and preferred his distance, but something was… off about it. Dickhead usually got up in her shit at every opportunity.

"Chloe… oh thank God, sweetheart…" Mom mumbled into her. "If I… If I lost you…"

Chloe didn't have the energy to greet her or soothe her fears. She just stood there in her Mom's arms and simply looked at the man standing on the other side of the hall. James Amber, the man who she needed to save her energy for. There was so much he needed to hear from her…

Chloe gently broke her way out of her Mom's tight grasp. She did it with a kiss on her cheek. It was enough to start the waterworks in her. As Mom stepped back, Chloe hobbled towards James. He looked… awful… lost. Rose had meant everything to him… and… and…

Chloe shook her head and stepped forward and wrapped her arms around James. The man froze up in her arms as she had for her own mom. He seemed unsure if he should return the gesture.

"James… this was my fault… all my fault…" she mumbled to him, struggling not to cry, struggling to be as strong as he was. "I should have told you… I shouldn't have…"

Her words snapped him out of self-imposed apathy. He reached out and placed his arms around her as she had done. Like Sera, he too touched the back of her head as though she was one of his own.
"Listen: this was not your fault Chloe..." he firmly reassured her, his voice rumbling through his and shaking her. "If you need to blame someone, there are only two who are fault: the one who did this and me for failing to recognize the signs the boy shown. I saw your reaction to him the day of the Wells' meeting. I just… assumed it was teenaged issues… but it was more, and I am sorry I failed you."

Chloe pulled her head back and shook her head. She wasn't getting off the hook that easily. She had destroyed the Amber family ad here James was trying to forgive her… it was wrong. It was so fucking wrong.

"He physically hurt Rachel, and I didn't tell you. I have pictures on my phone..." Chloe informed him, her voice strained and watery. "I-I wanted to tell you so badly, but she didn't... she didn't want to..."

James pulled back slightly and disengaged himself from the hug they shared. His expression narrowed. It wasn't anger, it seemed like he was back into a state of professionalism.

"It's still my fault. I created a situation where Rachel didn't trust me with what happened. The blame is mine alone, but this is a conversation for later," he said as his tone turned into something much more official. "For now, I need to speak to you in private. There's more to Eliot then I think you may be aware of."

Staring wearily at Rachel's dad as he seemed to return back into his District Attorney mode, Chloe nodded curtly and in silence, she followed his lead to a coffee break room where several police officers were standing around.

If she had thought her day couldn't have gotten any worse, she was about to be in for a surprise.

Chapter End Notes

I was astounded by the reaction I got from last Chapter. Honestly, I was sitting there writing it thinking that it was stupid or too quick, or out of character, but I guess that sort of happens when you're writing something you've been planning for a month or so. I'm thrilled you enjoyed.

I would like to thank you all for your kind words, and thank you again for reading! It means a lot to know you are enjoying this. See you soon.
Ignoring the heat and pain shooting through her wrist, as well as the blathering of Principal Wells behind her, Rachel Amber inspected Dorm 228 in silence.

She wasn't entirely sure why she was here. With finals this week, she came fully intending on completing them. She needed to feel normal, but her arrival was greeted by Wells, who promptly informed her that she was excused from the one thing that would take her mind off all this for at least a few hours. So instead she brought up living on campus, and here they were Wells was talking and she was pretending to be silently listening to what he had to say.

After what had happened there at her home, she just couldn't just be in the house anymore. She couldn't even roam her home in peace anymore; not with the flurry of activity. People from Dad's office, funeral planners and worst of all, the constant flow of neighbours attempting to convey their sympathy though home cooked meals as though that was supposed to ease fucking everything.

Dad… he was a fucking machine about everything. It was almost though he had to shut off the love he had for Mom in order to operate though this. Rachel supposed that this was an old trick for him. He had to do it in order to end his relationship with Sera. Probably was expected of him to do the same thing to Mom…

Silently, Rachel chastised herself for being a bitch about this. She might have had her problems with him, but Dad loved Mom; and Mom… Mom was his everything. She did a lot of background things to make his life easier - from cooking to raising their daughter so that he could focus on building his career to the point he was today. She never complained, never raised her voice even at the sacrifice of her own dreams. Rachel was not even her blood, and still she did this with the same love and devotion like she was. This was a well-worn out topic for her even long before what happened to her Mom, but it never really failed to astound her.

With her moving to Blackwell… it was probably for the best. It would be one less person Dad had to devote a lot of time on.

In his own grief, Dad seemed to be loosening the rules around Sera. Or perhaps more accurately, the conditions he imposed were something he didn't really give much of a shit about anymore. Sera had stayed for the duration of the hospital stay, but she wasn't brought over to the house after Rachel was discharged, Rachel did get a flurry of text messages from Sera, which was never the case before when… when.

She pushed that thought out of her head. She couldn't think about her too often… it hurt too much, and she just fucking knew it was only going to get worse from here…

"Miss Amber?" Principal Well's authoritarian tone directed its attention back to her.

Rachel turned around and found Principal Wells standing there with his arms behind his back, just staring at her like she was something to be pitied. She couldn't blame him. He was in a position where a student he admitted had…
She couldn't even finish that thought as she gripped her throbbing forearm. Nearly any thought that involved him and her together were near heresy…. Eliot Hampden didn't deserve to be spoken in the same sentence as her Mom. Mom was a fucking saint, and he was trash. Sick trash her fucking Dad seemed fine with accepting a fucking guilty plea to.

"I'm going to be honest with you, this is highly unorthodox for two students sharing a dorm room," Well spoke to her. "But in light of recent events…"

Rachel exhaled unsteadily, her hand flying up to silence him.

"I just need a room, and having a roommate in Chloe Price will mean I can keep a short leash on her for you. I'm doing you a favour," Rachel cut him off, offering opportunity to hold a debate with her over it. "Accept it or not, I don't really give a fuck."

Under any other circumstances, Wells' would have admonished her. Thankfully he chose to instead quietly abide her language choices. As dedicated as he might have been to his position, there was indeed a human underneath it all, and he seemed to have an understanding of her silent grief. She hated saying that about Chloe, but it was the only way to twist him to her direction.

"You… do make an excellent point. I… suppose that we can get this room ready for the fall," Wells slowly agreed with her. "I, on behalf myself and the rest of the staff of Blackwell Academy would like to convey our heartfelt sympathy for the tragic loss your family has endured."

Wells' paused for a moment. He seemed a little off from his usual self.

"On a personal note, I… do regret accepting the admittance of Mister Hampden. I regret even more that I did not notice his behaviour towards Miss Price," he continued, the mere mention of Chloe enough to send a shiver up her spine. "I suppose that in my own… prejudices, I had failed to see a threat which had formulated right before my sight… and you paid for it dearly. I will... strive to do better in the future."

Rachel nodded, she wanted to wanted to explode on him for his admittance that he was a total fucking bastard to someone she cared about… but she couldn't, she had to keep him pacified for the time being. So instead she managed to force a weak smile on her face, and with that, it did go towards easing some of the tension in the Principal. Perhaps that was enough. The war could be postponed.

"Thank you, sir…" she murmured back to him, not really meaning and feeling sort of bad she felt so… ambivalent towards him. "May I… have a moment…?"

Wells' considered the request for only a moment before he nodded curtly.

"Take all the time you need," he allowed as he backed away from her.

As the door closed behind him, Rachel stepped forward and slumped down on the edge of the nearest bed. With thoughts of… her off limits and thanks to Wells, her thoughts had lingered on to the other victim in this huge fucking mess; the victim in this who she had created through her own actions, her inactions, her own follies and worst of all, her damn pride.

Chloe Price.

It was only two days since she last saw Chloe. She was in a narcotic haze for much of yesterday, but now with the drugs worn off the full implications of the past few days dripping back into her thoughts, she was painfully aware of how empty everything had felt without Chloe there by her side. Dad had said he had to go out of his way to get Chloe to go home to get some rest. It was hard
to believe that Chloe had broken bone protecting her. That was pretty fucking badass to hear that.

But that was days ago, and since then there had been a steady silence between the two of them. Not on Chloe's part, but on hers….

She... just didn't know how to face Chloe after all of this. It had been her who caused all these events to transpire as they did. She had ignored Chloe's blatant pleas to go to her father. Her pride and inability to speak to her Dad about any of this had allowed Eliot a month to brood and simmer in his growing, unchecked hatred for her. His attraction to Chloe turned into a twisted obsession and led him to her home that night.

Worse still had been horrible whispers which she had overheard over the last day. That Eliot had been breaking into her home, stealing her things, cumulating to the theft of David Madsen's gun. The gun used to murder her mother.

She could not begin to imagine the sort of place Chloe was in, having that man living in her home. His carelessness had given him the means to kill her. Getting this dorm was probably the right move… that was if she would want it.

A new knot of guilt had built up inside her now. It was more... insidious then he loss. She might have been in Chloe's place this time around, but Chloe was a victim in her own right, and right about now Rachel was being a brand new Max Caulfield. It only compounded the guilt that she felt knowing that Chloe was still actively trying to get a hold of her.

She couldn't keep doing this anymore to others. She couldn't keep being this stupidly selfish; not when Chloe had shown her nothing but love... unconditional love and support through this horrible nightmare... and yet here she was... treating her like wasn't worth the effort back.

But Chloe Price was worth the effort. She deserved to know that, and for her not to do that, even in the depth of her loss was a crime in its own right.

As her stomach twisted into a knot, Rachel dried her eyes and left the dorm room she had hoped to share with Chloe. With her breath caught in her throat, she fumbled into her pocket to retrieve her phone as she left the room, pausing only for a moment to close the door behind her. With her head bowed as she looked at her screen, she did not notice the door opening up behind her, or the footsteps that stepped out behind her.

"Rachel?" a voice called out to her.

Rachel closed her eyes and exhaled. That... she did hear.

Reluctantly, she turned and found standing there was Victoria Chase, flanked by Taylor Christensen and whoever the fuck the other girl was... that one who always looked pissy at her... Courtney... Courtney Who-Gives-A-Fucking-Shit.

It appeared as though Victoria was settling into her new position quite well. Rachel couldn't have given less of a fuck right now. Rachel couldn't have given less of a fuck right now. It was something that might have concerned her once, but those days were long gone now.

As Victoria stepped forward towards Rachel, the shorter long haired blonde shifted from side to side as she struggled not to just break down and cry in front of the girl probably looking for something, anything to use against her. As devastated as she was, she did recognize that she still had several more years at this fucking school and weakness would only help the fucking bitch looking at her like she was ready to pounce at her.
"Victoria... Please... not right now..." Rachel begged the wealthy younger girl, her pride broken as she kept her eyes averted. "We hurt each other so much, I know that, I am sorry for my part, and I wish I had it in me to hear you call me a fucking bitch, or whatever amuses you today... but I really don't think I can deal with it... so please... just don't do it today..."

Victoria remained still and silent as she inspected the broken girl standing across the hall from her. Rachel forced her head up and looked directly into Victoria's direction. Victoria looked conflicted by Rachel's request; Taylor looked like she was close to tears herself and Courtney just sort of glared.

After a moment longer of deliberation, Victoria stepped forward, closing the gap between the two of them. Taylor and Courtney stepped forward as well, but Victoria shot them an expression that told them this was just between Rachel and her. Although she had seemed aloof from a distance, up close was a different story. Rachel should through the carefully applied makeup that shocked her.

Victoria had been crying...

The idea of Victoria feeling even a smidgen of empathy had actually sort of surprised Rachel. After a month of near constant insults to everything from being a basic whore to being a dyke whore from Victoria had left her fairly certain the girl was an irredeemable fucking bitch... but... there did seem to be more to her then what had met the eye. It just fucking sucked it took Mom dying for Chase to understand that Rachel Amber as every bit as fallible as anyone else.

The girls stared at each other for a moment before Victoria stepped forward and reached out, her hers gripping each of Rachel's forearms gently.

"I'm going to hug you, Rachel..." Victoria murmured awkwardly to her grieving rival. "So... please don't freak out or anything..."

Rachel didn't really have much of a say in the matter. Victoria stepped forward and wrapped her armed around her. Together the two passive aggressive enemies stood there with Taylor and Courtney as their silent witnesses to a 'hell freezes over' microcosm.

Deciding against resisting or showing any sort of resentment, Rachel uncertainly reached out and returned the gesture. She remained silent, feeling Victoria's heart beat against hers.

"I know you probably have been getting this a lot, and I know you probably don't believe it from my lips with all fucking school drama and whatever... but I am so sorry for your loss, Rachel..." Victoria breathed softly into Rachel's ear. "Rose was... always very nice to me... to everyone helping with the production this year... she always seemed so... sweet... unlike you... and... I'm just... sorry..."

Rachel closed her eyes and emitted a small chuckle at the barb Victoria may or may not have meant to issue her... it wasn't perfect, but from Victoria and taking into account their sordid encounters at each other's throats, it must have been hard for her to say all of that and mean it.

Rachel decided that in the interest of peace and expediency, she would just have to take what the other girl was offering. The sooner Victoria was pacified; the sooner she could focus on what was important: chiefly calling Chloe.

"Thank you, Victoria..." Rachel murmured back to her as she remained still in Chase's arms. "After everything... it feels more real hearing it from you than from a lot of other people who've done so already... and maybe... maybe next year we could try being friends. We don't... have to destroy each other..."
She meant it as well. Every word spoken was a desire she honestly found herself wishing for. There was something in Victoria's effort to empathize that struck a nerve compared to a lot of other people. She had no reason to be nice, yet here she was being just that.

Rachel felt Victoria nod apparently agreeing to the idea, or at the very least they would try to. For her and for now that would be good enough.

Pulling back slightly was enough to break the stillness between the two of them. The moment between them where Rachel Amber and Victoria Chase had forgotten who they were seemed to be over. She watched for only a moment as Victoria turned away and joined her friends and nodded as she say Taylor mouth out 'sorry' to her.

As the girls retreated back into Victoria's room, Rachel quickened her pace out of the dorms, turning on her phone and dialled Chloe's number with trembling hands. She didn't have it in her to issue a text message. It would just be cold and impersonal compared to hearing Chloe's reassuring voice.

As the phone rung, she brought it to her ear and paced on the front steps of the dormitory. She refused to make eye contact with any of the people out on the dorm grounds… she wanted to hear Chloe… she needed to hear her. It really was like she was one person in this world who would bring about any sort of clarity back to her. Someone who understood completely what had happened.

It took two rings before the phone line connected.

"Rachel?" she heard Chloe speak breathlessly. "Are… are you okay?"

Rachel choked back the sob that had built up as the thought that she would never hear from Chloe again had been irrationally forced into her mind. Her heart was beating so much faster than it should have been. She wondered how it was that this girl – who in the grand scheme of things she barely knew – held so much sway, so much power over her.

All the pieces, the confusing feelings… it all made sense.

This was the moment Rachel Amber knew for certain that she was in love with Chloe Price.

"Chloe…" she breathed to the girl she loved. "I fucked up so hard… I'm so fucked up… Could you come to Blackwell? I want you here. I need to see you…"

There was a silence, but it was only for a moment.

"Well you're in luck. Someone tipped me off where you were…” Chloe replied back. "I'm at the front of the school, but come quickly… I'm about to get swamped by people…”

Nodding as though Chloe could see her, Rachel stepped down the steps and quietly moved as fast as she could to the front. Through the sea of agonizing loss she was trying to navigate though, the one bright spot was guiding her in the horizon. It offered her refuge and safety from the storm. It never wavered, never lied, it was never was not there for her, even in spite of how shitty she was in her grief.

Rachel would remain focused on her North Star.

Her Polaris.

*Her Chloe.*
True to her pleas, it didn't take long to spot Chloe Price as Rachel thought it might have.

Chloe was there, in a foot cast and was currently surrounded by a group of Blackwell students who were clearly aware about her part in what had happened, chief among them Dana, Steph, Juliet Watson, Mikey and Drew North. She looked uncomfortable and silent as the group seemed to be trying to engage her in conversation.

She hesitated as a wave of shame washed over her; but it did not last for long. Not as a strange overwhelming jealousy that washed over Rachel as she watched Dana pull Chloe into a tight hug which seemed to drown and startle Chloe. Seeing that… affection from the tall, gorgeous cheerleader… that was all the motivation she needed to get her legs moving forward towards the only fucking person who mattered to her.

That was her place to be, her place in Chloe's arms, and not Dana's…

Yes… she was being foolish, and she was hypocritical; but quietly she hoped Chloe would have felt the same at the sight of Victoria hugging her. Scratch that… she knew Chloe would be annoyed. The question was, whether or not it would be jealousy or steadily rising hostility toward Victoria for being… well… Victoria.

The gathering of students noticed her approach towards them, and much more importantly Chloe noticed it. She looked embarrassed by the affections of the very affectionate Dana and carefully disengaged herself from it as the shorter girl pushed through group and stopped in front of Chloe.

"Rachel…" Chloe greeted her, her voice weak and miserable.

Rachel remained silent as through her blurry sight she observed Chloe carefully. She watched as Chloe's stance sort of slouch as her confidence withered and died in front of everyone. It became clear what this reaction was to Rachel as she held her eyes on Chloe as she became guiltier each passing moment.

"Are you standing there thinking that I somehow blame you for… this?" she asked Chloe one simple question.

Chloe's lack of answer had spoken volumes to her. There was a surge of anger that blindsided her simply because Chloe would feel like this situation was something she had a hand in. She did nothing to warrant the obsessions of that bastard… she tried to do something… say something… and every time she brought it up, it was Rachel who had shut all conversations down. This happened because of her fuck up.

Mom had died because of her.

Rachel reached out; blinking back the tears once again forming in her eyes as her own guilt ate away at her resolve. She took both of Chloe's hands. Chloe stiffened and glanced around at the people watching. Rachel didn't care. She didn't care one bit about the people in close proximity. Witnesses or not, there were things that needed to be said. These were feelings which had to be expressed.

Feelings that had to be spoken allowed…
"It was my fault," Rachel refuted, taking a step closer to her Chloe. "You tried to get me to go to Dad a month before this happened. You tried to talk Eliot down and I … I attacked him and he… killed… You're always doing the right thing, and I'm always finding a worse way to fuck everything up…"

Chloe wanted to interrupt, to somehow find a way to shift the blame so it fell back into her lap again in some masochist way.

"And you know what the real fucking kicker is?!" Rachel exclaimed, forcing Chloe back from her attempt to pull the blame back down on top of herself. "Here you are, willfully ignoring that you were always right, yet instead you're blaming yourself for what I did and blaming yourself for the obsessions of a fucking stalking piece of shit. Someone who thought that you belonged without even consulting you about it…"

Racheltrailed off in to silent tear dripping fury. Talking about Eliot drove her rage back to the near unmanageable levels. She wanted to tear the fucking flesh off him. Hurt him the way he hurt her mom and Chloe. She had never hated anyone else more in her entire life than him…

Rachel exhaled unsteadily, sniffling as the thoughts of her seeing her Mom in her final pose haunted everything; it tainted all the happiness and love they had together, ripped away because a boy thought he could own a girl. Everything was just fucked… so irreparably fucked. She made no fucking sense, yet here she was trying to operate in the world so soon after losing her.

"I need you to get this through your thick head, Price," she pressed on. There was no malice in her words, just an exhausted echo staining them. "This was on me. It's not your fault, and I'm never going to abandon you, or blame you, or hate you… and… and…"

She hid the urge to softly whimper as Chloe pulled one hand out of hers and carefully wiped the tears rolling freely down her cheek. The lines between plain grief and unconscious arousal from a simple touch had blurred to a near single indistinguishable one. With a single graze something had happened for the first time since Sunday.

She had actually felt something.

Rachel exhaled sharply as tears flowed again. She looked up to Chloe, and in spite of everything that had happened. The nightmare they both were trapped in, and the fact that she was never going to see someone she loved so much ever, she somehow found it in herself to smile.

She was only scarcely aware of the guys and girls watching their interactions with baited breathes. None of them even registered in comparison to the majesty of the girl smiling reassuringly to her, smiling with that unconditional compassion. That unconditional, unspoken love…

Yes, Chloe was her North Star, her Polaris, and here she stood leading her home to her embrace.

"…And I love you, Chloe Price… I fucking love you…" she confessed to the girl across from her. "And this isn't because of what happened, this isn't because Mom died and everything has gone to shit. I have loved you for a long time now, but I've been too much of a coward to say it; and I am so sorry if you thought I was leading you on, or stringing you along, because I wasn't… I just… I love you, Chloe."

The words had been spoken. They were out there, and not just for their ears only anymore. Surrounding them were a group of stunned faces looking at them. The only unsurprised was Steph Gingrich, who instead looked a little smug by the turn of events. The only sound any of them uttered a tiny 'holy shit' from Dana, who was immediately nudged by Juliet, who looked sort of
impressed.

None of their reactions mattered much to Rachel. Not as she took in the sweet small smile Chloe radiated.

"You love me?" she repeated.

Chloe's voice was almost worried, like she did not want to read too much into it in fear that she had misheard it. Considering Rachel had stated flat out she loved was kind a worrying response. Exhaling, Rachel reached out, her hands pulling back out of Chloe's so that she could wrap them instead around her hips.

"No… I said I fucking love you, Chloe Price…” Rachel answered her back, a little more firmly than it had been before. "I kind of thought I made that clear enough…"

As she seemed to process the affirmation that this was not some sort of false proclamation, Chloe ran her hand along the back of her neck and tried to take a small step backwards. Unwilling to give her that space, Rachel followed her with her grip on Chloe firmly placed on her hips.

Chloe glanced at the group pretending terribly to be causal about this confession which they had gotten to witness.

"Yeah… it's just that I promised Sera that I would be brave enough to say how I felt to you," she explained, her voice lowering at the mention of her biological mother. "I think she's under the impression I'm somehow the guy in this… or something…"

Even in this mess, Rachel could not help but smile. It hurt, thinking of a life past all of this… but she still did it. Thinking about Sera… she lost a mom, and then already had another in her life… fucked up was everything, anyways?

"Well that's tough shit, Price," Rachel informed her, attempting to inject some sort of humour to cover up heartache. "You were the one who was brave enough to admit that there was a spark… so it's my turn to be brave enough to say the words."

A small blush washed over Chloe's face as Chloe's desperate wine empowered confession drifted back to the forefront of their minds. It felt so long ago… she wanted those days back. Back when she thought her Dad was just a cheating sack of shit and she had only one mom who was alive… but now…

Rachel's mind went blank as Chloe's arms wrapped around her. Sensory overload as her strong arms enveloped her completely. It seemed like she seemed to finally get it through to her. Quietly Rachel wondered if Chloe had bought that Eliot fucker's lines… that she wouldn't care for her… that the feelings she felt were one-sided… or worse… something to be ashamed of… something to hide away from the world; the popular girl falling for the social outcast… and an impossible dream which Eliot tried to plant into her head.

She… hoped this would clear the last of the doubts…

"You know what though? I guess you could be the one who gets to kiss me first in front of all these people pretending not to watch us…” Rachel murmured to her…love.

Love…

Holy shit… this was real…
Rachel watched her love silently, her lips parted and numb as Chloe seemed to hesitate; but that hesitation was only for a single painful moment. She watched, stunned as Chloe lowered her head and connected her lips to Rachel's. They had kissed before… they had kissed a lot… but this was different. This was sweeter and gentle… romantic…

…and unfortunately for poor Chloe, Rachel wanted more...

Rachel pushed back as hard as she could against Chloe's mouth, fingers snaking through Chloe's hair, catching the tall girl off guard. She parted Chloe's lip, the tip of her dancing with Price's. She could feel Chloe start to Buckle, so Rachel reached out and stabilized her.

She ignored the sad smile on Steph lips as she pulled slightly back. She ignored Drew covering Mikey's eyes up, and the ensuing play fight that followed, she ignored Juliet looking like Christmas had come early and Dana quietly watching, almost… entranced. She paid no attention to Steph as she stepped forward and sort of ushered everyone away so that Chloe and Rachel could have the privacy.

The only thing that mattered was the fire of Chloe's mouth touching against hers again, how unperturbed and unafraid they were in the presence of others...

This was their moment.

Pulling her mouth off of Chloe's and exhaling unevenly, Rachel tucked her head into Chloe's collar, her arms gripping onto her as tight as she could without hurting the girl. Her mind as punch drunk as it was, could not help but return back to what was about to come…

"I'm not going to be okay, am I?" she murmured into Chloe's shoulder, her lips grazing against her skin.

Chloe remained silent, her hand reaching up to touch the back of Rachel's head. Rachel already knew the answer Chloe had waiting for her. She still needed to hear it…she needed to know from someone who travelled down this route before.

"Not for a long time..." Chloe murmured above her. "But I'm here for you, and so are your Dad, and Sera… and a lot of people who love you..."

Rachel pulled her head back to properly look at Chloe. She understood what Chloe was saying, and even at some level… she wanted to believe it; but even now, even after everything, she couldn't just accept that anything had really changed. Dad was still a controlling liar who had just gotten his world kicked in and Sera's recent devotion to her hadn't made up for the decade and a half of abandonment in favour chasing Heroin across the country. A year of sobriety was fucking nothing. She was in a far too fragile a place to place any sort of real trust or confidence in. Maybe one day a long time from now things would be different… but not now.

No… at the end of the day, she only held that trust for Chloe and Mom… and Mom was gone...

"You're still the only one of them I trust," Rachel mumbled as she looked down to rest herself back into Chloe. "I feel… sick and wrong… I don't know how I'm going to handle the next few days, let alone the next years. I only came here because… I didn't know what else to do, and I was too ashamed to call you…. and..."

As Chloe's lips touched the top of her head, Rachel ceased her ramblings. She stood there, being slightly swayed in Chloe's arms. She felt warm, protected… she felt alive….

"Take it from someone who sort of been where you are... do what you have to do to survive," Chloe
whispered above her, stroking her hair gently. "I'm going to be here right beside you... because I fucking love you as well, Rachel Amber..."

Chloe didn't need to say the words, but Rachel did not deny there was a wave of relief to hear them spoken.

Nestled there in her arms, facing away from the terrible unknown, Rachel liked that comforting reassurance. With Chloe at her side, the future would be a far less frightening one to stand up against.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to go straight into the funeral and wake, but I decided I put you all through enough of a miseryfest with the last two chapters. I thought we needed a slightly lighter moment for everyone's sake including my own. Next chapter we'll have to dive in. The final chapter before we jump forward.

Thanks for all the kind words as usual. I hope to hear more from you in the near future.

Next Chapter: Chloe has a story to tell.
For the first time since Dad's death, Chloe had found herself in a dress and at another one. While she was not exactly a fan of them, Rose Amber was worth all the effort she could give.

It was a real testament to Rose's life as Chloe took in the sight of easily two hundred or more people who had shown up for the ceremony. Local and state politicians had shown up, along with various members of law enforcement had shown as well. People from all walks of life and corners from Arcadia Bay made their journey to pay their final respects to a socially active woman who had apparently touched many lives through volunteer work and her general good nature.

There was so much Chloe had not known about Rose and it hurt so fucking much to think that she never bothered to go into much detail about Rose's life. Her ignorance was brought on by the constant procrastination and assumptions. Procrastinating by saying there was always more time and assuming there would always be another tomorrow.

Well there wasn't any more time for that. Rose was gone, and so to was a life time's worth of experience, ripped away because in a large part of her failure to not act until it was too late. Rachel could try to excuse her all she liked, but she knew better. She recognized she was not completely to blame, but Chloe knew her role in this.

Well… she would find a way to make up for it. For her crimes, she would learn every detail she could about Rose from those who lost her. She would be the receptacle of their memories of her. The life of Rose Amber would not be forgotten, nor overshadowed by her death.

As Chloe looked around, she took in the fact that Rose's funeral was by far a more extravagant affair compared to her Dad's. James Amber had pulled out all the stops and spared no expenses. Caters were brought in from Portland for the upcoming wake. Yet despite all the money he had put into her send off, thanks to that bastard Hampden there was no open viewing for her friends and family. There was no way not to minimize the facial trauma she had endured.

While this no viewing was the case for most, it was not in Rachel's nature to just lie down and take no for an answer. Rachel asked her to run interference on James and others, so that she slip behind the scenes to open the coffin in private and whisper her last goodbyes to a mother she had loved so much.

As Rachel took her final steps with her mother, Chloe could not help but reflect on her own. Currently she and her walking dildo accessory to murder (in her eyes) were blended somewhere into the crowd. She didn't know where exactly and right now she wasn't sure if she cared.

To say that there was a blowout between mother and daughter was an understatement. The accumulation of tension caused since the moment David Madsen had entered their lives finally reached the explosion as James – a man clearly on the brink – had sat her down and explained what Eliot had confessed to doing, and that the gun he used belonged to David.

She got sick as she heard and saw the images of things which were stolen – clothing, junk, her fucking underwear - but it was finding out that he had brought a gun into their home without
consulting anyone was what pushed over her the edge. To make matters all that much worse, that stupid bastard who not only brought a gun into the house had the fucking gall to justify it with the tired recital of the fucking second amendment.

She didn't need a fucking reminder of the constitution; the mother of her friend… her girlfriend's mother was dead.

It only fell apart more from there on out. Unable to explode in front of the obviously hurting James, Chloe instead stormed clear out of the hospital, ignoring protocol, and they spent a good half an hour screaming at each other… well… she was screaming, Mom was just taking it clearly filled with a mixture of shame and devastation as she tried to reconcile that someone was breaking into their house to fuel a horrifying obsession with her only daughter and that she had willfully lied to her about.

They had another fight the night she came home from Rachel's at James's request. Mom had seen the iPhone 3GS James had given her after Chloe had to surrender her old phone to the authorities so that the evidence of Rachel's injuries could be filed.

Mom freaked out at the sight of it, like she had thought that James had bought it for her brand new (she wouldn't mention the implication that she had somehow was exploiting a grieving dad) and so Chloe had to remind her at the top of her fucking lungs that she had had her phone over for a murder trial.

After all of this, she couldn't believe it but she was actually eager for school to start in September. Mom could finally be alone with the one she actually wanted to be with, and Rachel had gotten them a double room on campus, which would offset the cost. They couldn't exactly push the beds together, but they could always have impromptu nightly battles over who was the master of the single mattress.

Of course, she hadn't told Mom any of this yet… soon, but for now fuck it. Fuck Mom… Joyce and fuck David. She had made her choice and reset how they were together.

As the Pastor recited a passage from the book of… well, she wasn't sure what… Chloe tentatively reached out and placed her hand on Rachel shoulder. She was sitting in front of her next to her father. Like him, she too was stone faced. As much as tried to dismiss the influences her father had over her since the reveal, it was obvious how much strength she drew from the man.

Diverting her eyes away from the casket, Chloe took in the crowd on the opposite side. There were few familiar faces. Wells was there, the drama teacher Keating was with what appeared to be his boyfriend, and a few students had made it there. Steph and rest of the drama class were gathered, and most curiously Victoria Chase, her hands folded in front of her.

For a moment the two girls locked eyes. Victoria looked tired and upset, as though she was genuinely upset by this. The sight of her like this made Chloe soften her eyes. If that was the case, then she would go easy on her. At least until she acted out.

Chloe turned away and took in another sight that warmed her heart. Standing there behind a couple of older people was Sera. Like Chloe, she wore a long silky black dress and wore heavy aviators as though she didn't want to be recognized. Considering some of James and Rose's family had flown in, she probably had a good reason to be concerned about being identified.

Although her eyes were hidden, the glasses did not hide the desire to rush over and embrace her child by any means. Sera did not move, and it was for the best. The thing Sera and James needed was a scene here of all places; there would be plenty of time for her and Rachel in the future. Sera's
role in her life was about to grow even larger.

Chloe felt a hand belonging to Rachel reach back and grab hers, gently squeezing it in a desperate need for her support. Chloe could feel her shaking as they listened to the pastor speak of the resurrection, that the separation they would have with Rose was a temporary state and soon they would all meet again.

Chloe didn't know if there was a God. While she was leaning towards no, she couldn't quite commit to that. What she could commit to was that if there was a God, then he was cruel master who thought it was a reasonable thing to have a selfless and loving mother to get gunned down in her own home like it was a casual fucking thing.

Ignoring her flaring rage, Chloe inched closer to Rachel, her free hand touching her bicep. Rachel glanced back to her as the sensation surprised her. She might have been a stone, but her red and bloodshot eyes told a different story. She turned away, the back of her head leaning back to rest against Chloe's stomach.

Chloe wanted to reach down, to hold her in her arms, to kiss her and show her how much she loved her; but it didn't seem like a very funerally thing to do. Besides, the pastor was looking right at them. She took a wild stab and assumed what was going on between Rachel and she would not be particularly welcomed... you know... a damned to hell sort of thing.

"We commend unto thy hands of mercy, most merciful Father, the soul of this our sister departed, and we commit her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; and we beseech thine infinite goodness to give us grace to live in thy fear and love and to die in thy favour, that when the judgement shall come which thou hast committed to thy well-beloved daughter, both this our sister and we may be found acceptable in thy sight. Grant this, O merciful Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our only Saviour, Mediator, and Advocate. Amen."

As the gathering collectively murmured 'Amen', the Pastor closed his prayer book, he emitted a small empathetic smile, first directed to James and Rachel, but then he directed it to the gathering as a whole.

"James and Rachel have asked for the opportunity give a final farewell to our sister, Rose," the Pastor addressed the mass. "At this time, a celebration of Rose's life shall be held at the Amber home. You are welcomed to the home to remember, to laugh, to grieve; and most importantly, to heal."

The crowd obeyed the request made by the man leading the ceremony. They slowly broke up and moved off down the cemetery hill towards the parking lot. A few of them pausing to shake James hand and issue their condolence to Rachel. As the crowd's lightened, Chloe noticed Joyce and David. David was in full blown tears and Joyce had to lead him back to the car.

Chloe swallowed any pity he might have felt for him and turned away. She noticed Sera hesitating to leave. Sort of going through the motions of the Pastor's request, but she was going to probably double back.

Remembering that in spite of everything, she was not a member of the family she stood with, Chloe let go of Rachel and stepped back and started to leave so that James, Rachel and eventually Sera could have their privacy to reflect.

As she started to move away, she was stopped by a heavy hand that grabbed her by her sleeve of her dress. It was James. He did not look at her as he held his attention on the casket; at least not at first. He turned his head and looked at Chloe properly. He was exhausted in every possible way,
but in spite of it, he remained firm in his grasp.

"The priest said I'd like the immediate family to stay behind," James stated, softly dazed as he held his eyes on her. "You are our family, Chloe."

Chloe felt her stomach bottom out, her legs grow weak at the affirmation James had made. She looked at him, expecting to see a trace of deception which Rachel spent so long insisting was there. There was none that she could see. James didn't blink, didn't look like he had any sort of hesitation of second thought.

James wasn't just offering an empty platitude... the meant it.

Chloe looked to Rachel, who had turned back as she too heard what her father had said. Although she was in tears, she nodded furiously. For the first time in a long time, it appeared as though father and daughter had finally come to a unanimous agreement.

She reached out, wrapping her arms around James. It took a moment for him to process it, but he hugged her back, but only briefly. He pulled back after a moment and led Chloe to the seat he had been sitting in and sat her down next to Rachel. As she sat down, Rachel reached out and took Chloe's left hand into hers.

As the last people made their way down the hill, Chloe looked and noticed Sera was there, lingering alone halfway to the parking lot. Without anyone watching, she silently took small steps towards them until she was back at the grave site. While Rachel remained ambivalent to this, James appeared... almost grateful she was here. Chloe merely offered the woman a smile, which returned as she pulled off her glasses and joined James at his side, her eyes lingering sadly on the coffin.

The four of them remained locked in silent reflection as they held their eyes on Rose's final resting place. Sighing Rachel leaned her head towards Chloe and rested it against her shoulder.

"Could I... say something?" Sera spoke up suddenly, breaking the through the void.

Sera looked to James as though she was looking for his approval. After moment of lingering on the casket, he turned to look at Sera and he nodded. With his permission, she looked to Rachel to wait for hers. Rachel lingered a little longer, but she allowed a small nod to be seen.

With permission from the Amber's on hand and a smile Chloe emitted for her, Sera exhaled. Her eyes lingered on the coffin she stood next to.

"I didn't know Rose well. We didn't talk a lot for obvious reasons," she admitted to the ones who were watching. "She had built a life for herself... for the two of you, and I shook it up. She had every reason to hate and despise me. Yet, she never expressed a hatred for me, never showed her suspicions when it would be so easy, she never judged or pitied me. That was the sort of respect I never thought anyone would grant me. Yet she gave that to me freely. She gave me access to her life, to you, and I cannot imagine many mothers willing to place that sort of... trust in a stranger."

Rubbing the back of her neck, Sera audibly swallowed.

"I watched her from afar over the past month, and I was so envious, and it not in a bitter way," she continued. "She lived with love and strength and she I saw how she would drop everything to see to the happiness of the two of you. That was who she was, a fountain of devotion to the ones she loved. Everything she ever did, she did believing in it wholeheartedly. She had a contentment I think few of us will ever achieve; and she loved you both with unconditional devotion even fewer have. She took a leap of faith into this broken little family, and she became the glue which fastened
Sera paused to reorganize her thoughts. Chloe sat there, quietly stunned watching the woman poor her heart out. She watched as Sera rubbed her mouth before she finally turned her attention to James. Their eyes were locked on each other now.

"James, she taught you to open your heart up; she showed you how to trust and love again," she spoke to him, her voice firm and inflexible, as though she needed him to understand. "The last thing she would want is for you to just… shut down like before. It would be so easy to just… look at the world as a mess, unfixable and no longer worth your efforts; but she would not want that. She loved you so much, and to return to whom you were because of… this. It would be such a disservice to her efforts. You need to understand that we'll be here for you every step of the way because we owe you that much… because we do love you, even though we don't say it."

Sera turned away from the stunned looking ex-husband, and turned her attention to her daughter.

"Rachel, I will never be able to express how grateful I am to her for being your mother, because everything good in you came from her…" she breathed, taking a step towards the sitting girl. "For the longest time during the early days of my sobriety, I held nothing but hate in my heart for her, and her decision to join James and you. I thought that she was trying to erase me from you. But that hatred faded as I watched you from afar and saw things I never had radiate from you. Artistic passion, ambition, bravery… loyalty to those you believe in… that was all her, and when I met her for the first time I wished I had the courage to tell her that she was the best thing to happen to you… the absolute best thing…"

Next to Chloe, Rachel renewed her stream of tears as her biological mother spoke of her mother with such unimpeded warmth. There was not a single note of resentment. Sera smiled slightly for her child and glanced back to Rose.

"There was a grace to her which at first I thought I could never achieve… but now I see that it was something none of us could," she continued lowly. "The three of us are fractured. Damaged by a war James and I waged against each other and you, Rachel, an innocent victim in all of this. Rose was the one who saw the good in you two and brought about a change... healing… and together you both survived and flourished, and I will never not be grateful for her compassion. But now she's gone, torn away from you two; and already the fractures are revealing themselves. We can't fight each other like this anymore. It will kill us. Everything she did to save you both would be in vain, and we all owe her to be better than our base instinct to destroy each other."

Sera closed her eyes for a moment before she averted them.

"We're never going to be the same, and we can't fix everything overnight; but the three of us… four of us…" she amended, looking Chloe squarely in the eyes. "We all need to figure out a way to survive. We have to survive for her."

As Sera lapsed back into silence, Chloe pushed her hand up and wiped any mist build up in her eyes. Next to her, Rachel was shaking again, her head bowed as she covered her mouth as James rested his hand on his daughter's shoulder. The rare display of confidence Sera had held herself to eroded right there on the spot. She looked worried that she had overstepped her boundaries.

"Anyways… I'm sorry for that… rambling…" she murmured as she seemed to return back to her usual demure, self-deprecating self. "It's just… I don't know if there is a heaven; I never asked her if she believed… but right now I hope there is, because Rose earned her wings a long time ago and without her here… we are so much poorer without her…"
Rachel stood up as Sera trailed off again. She stepped forward slowly towards her, surprising Sera and pulled her into a hug. Safely buried into the nape of Sera's neck, Rachel allowed herself to softly cry. Sera remained still, her hand tenderly rubbing the back of her daughter's neck as she looked from James to Chloe, hoping that they were in agreement that something had to change.

A smile formed on Chloe's face as she stepped forward, her fingers grazing the top of the casket. It seemed as though Rachel and Sera were on the same page now. There was no way Sera could fill the hole Rose left in Rachel, but there was a place for Sera regardless. It was okay to allow yourself to be open to love as Sera was offering.

She hoped that Rose would approve of this.

No, she knew Rose would approve of it.

Next to her James stood. He bent forward, his lips touching the casket. He still hadn't cried or shed a tear. He was far too broken up by this if he couldn't properly process his grief. It... sort of reminded her of herself after Dad died. It took a long time for her to come to terms with it. Perhaps James was like that as well; whatever the case was, she would offer her help to him as she did to Rachel.

Slowly, reluctantly, Rachel pulled back from Sera, one hand gripping her hand, as the other wiped her eyes. She broke the connection and stepped towards Chloe.

"Dad… Sera… I'm going to go home with Chloe…" Rachel managed to murmur out thickly, her voice affected by her snuffed nose. "We'll be there soon, okay?"

Sera and James shared a look before James nodded. James stepped forward towards Rachel, not entirely certain what he wanted to do, or whether or not he was right to expect to be allowed to hug his daughter or not. The relationship between them was still too fragile to expect anything.

But the question was answered for him. In spite of her mistrust and anger, Rachel launched herself into her Dad's arms for the first time in a very long time. She did not sob or cry, but she remained firmly entrenched in her Father's arms. Above her, James emitted an unsteady exhale which was mixed into an unconscious sob.

Rachel pulled back out of her Dad's arms quicker than she had Sera's and joined Chloe's side, her fingers subtly folding into her girlfriend's. James looked from Rachel to Chloe and nodded. Touching the coffin one final time, he silently made his way down the hill, Sera at his side.

With them out of earshot, Rachel turned to Chloe, her eyes wet. Chloe reached up, her fingertips wiping the tears staining her cheek. Rachel smiled slightly and stepped forward to nudge her in an effort to be a little playful. Rachel leaned forward, her lips touching the tip of Chloe's nose.

"Would you like to go and see your Dad, Chloe?" she asked plainly. There was no delicacy to her words.

Chloe blinked at her, the question catching her off guard. Even in the face of... all of this... Rachel seemed to think that Chloe mattered in all of this. This day was supposed to be for her, not for digging up the old ghosts which haunted Chloe even to this day.

Still... she wasn't going to pass up a visit to her Dad. It had been awhile, and she supposed it was as good a time as any to introduce him to her girlfriend.

As Chloe's slowly nodded Rachel emitted a half smile and went to her Mom's casket. As her Dad had done, she placed her lips on the top and stepped back, pausing briefly to gather a half dozen
lilies and roses which the mourners had left behind for her Mom.

"We can't go visiting him without bringing something, now can we?" Rachel asked her quietly.

Chloe nodded, forcing her watery eyes to remain just that. She planted her lips on Rachel's forehead and together in silence Chloe took the lead on the familiar route to final resting place of William Price.

...

...

"You know… you look really good in a dress, Chloe…"

As Rachel and Chloe wandered up the pathway towards her father in virtual silence, the compliment Rachel had issued was both a surprise and a little flirty.

As Chloe looked over to Rachel and found the girl holding her hand tightly, she had found that she was smiling for the first time today. She ignored the little voice in the back of her head, telling her that Rachel was just saying it, that she didn't actually mean it. Chloe felt stupid wearing it; it should have her lanky form for others to see. She did not look anywhere near as elegant as Rachel did, and Rachel blotchy faced from her mourning.

"Disclaimer: I'm not really a dress wearing sort of girl…" she tried to brush off as casually as she could.

Rachel rolled her eyes and looked up at her.

"You weren't much of a showering type of girl when we first starting hanging out either..." Rachel shot back at her, her head bowing as she struggled not to laugh as Chloe bounced her hip against the smaller girl's to throw her off balance.

"Bitch…" Chloe playfully growled back.

Regaining her footing, Rachel managed to crack out a strained grin. It was an expression Chloe had come to miss so fucking much over the past few days.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to try and change you…" Rachel murmured a promise to Chloe. "…but I would not be too terribly upset if I caught you in one every so often. One day soon it might even be a little fun."

For the first time ever, Chloe was glad to have reached to her Dad's final resting place. Rachel had turned the flirting up to fucking 11 in a single sentence. Fighting back her blush as awful thoughts of what she wanted to do with the girl streamed through her mind, she instead nudged her girlfriend and gestured to the gravestone which stood there in front of them. There was some ivy growth on it, the sight of it made her feel a little guilty. Rachel sort of tinged pink slightly and sniffled as she read the name on the stone and looked up to Chloe. She extended the flowers to Chloe, who gently reached out took them.

She stepped forward, releasing her grip on Rachel's hands as she carefully lowered herself onto her knees. She sat there for a moment, staring the weathered stone, somewhat ashamed at her inability to visit more often than she did.

Exhaling, Chloe set Rose's flowers down against the stone.
"Hey, Dad…" she spoke out loud, her hands working the ivy off. "Sorry I haven't come in a while… It's easier to pretend you're with me without going to this place…"

As she started pulling the strands at the root, she felt a hand graze up the curve of her spine. Chloe looked and found Rachel was in the grass next to her.

"Can I help you?" Rachel asked delicately, not wanting to intrude. "I'm certain I'm going to be here often… I might as well practice."

Chloe nodded without even a pause, and together the two of them worked the ivy and weeds away from the gravestone and the grounds. Rachel, of course, worked quicker than Chloe. She had disclosed weeks ago that when she was younger Rose had taught her how to garden. One of the many skills the mother had bestowed on her daughter.

"The day my Dad died, I had Max Caulfield over for a sleepover…" Chloe murmured next to Rachel.

She wasn't quite sure why she spoke. It just sort of spilled out of her. With the two of them standing over the grave, and Chloe intimately aware of how Rose had died, it just felt… right to let her know something that she had buried deep inside her for the past two years.

She watched as Rachel paused her rooting. She looked up wearily at Chloe, like she wasn't sure if this was going to be a particularly nice memory.

It wasn't.

"We were making breakfast with him, when my Mom called from the grocery store," Chloe continued on, aware that her audience was barely breathing. "When my Dad left, I found Max just… sitting by the phone. She was… almost hysterical, just crying her eyes out."

Chloe rubbed her wrist; Rachel's eyes were narrowed as she appeared entranced by the secret Chloe was sharing.

"I asked her what was wrong… and she just looked at me in a way that I never saw her look at me before," Chloe spoke, unable to hide the wobble in her tone. "I just… she was already acting weird right before Dad got the call. She was pale and sort of sick… but this so fucking different. I can't even really describe what it now. It was just this… terrible pain. Like she had done something and she couldn't forgive herself…"

The thoughts of that final day were too much. Chloe dragged her dress sleeve along her eyes and looked to Rachel, who was still staring at her. She looked awful as she seemed to digest this final day Chloe had with her dad. Chloe reached out and squeezed Rachel's hand.

"And she said: 'I tried to make things different for you. I did try… I'm sorry. Listen, whatever happens, I want you to be strong. Even if you feel like I was never there for you… because I will never abandon you, Chloe. I'll always have your back, always…'

That was word for word what she said. It was so… creepy and prophetic that she just couldn't forget it even if she tried. The dream… that terrible dream had brought it all back to the fucking surface and she just had to tell someone. Someone who wouldn't just fucking laugh in her face at this.

Someone who she knew loved her enough to listen…

"But she left you, didn't she?" Rachel spoke softly, not wanting to jockey herself against the girl
she didn't know. "She left you alone to deal through your dad by yourself, and even if she had no choice in that, she still ghosted you."

Chloe nodded firmly. Yeah… that fucking sucked.

"Yes she did… but it's also why I haven't let go of her…" she confirmed for Rachel slowly. "It's like…somewhere inside me there's like… an echo that I cannot get rid of. An event or something significant that both happened and didn't happen, which made a 13 year old girl to speak like she was an adult with some serious regrets; and I asked her about it before the funeral, but she didn't remember saying it. I thought she was being a bitch or mean or something… but now that I'm older… there just feels like more to this… and maybe one day I'll get an answer."

The question now not only fresh in her mind, but officially panted into Rachel's as well, Chloe turned to her girlfriend. Rachel's head was bowed. She seemed to be trying to work the puzzle out as well already. Perhaps she would. If there was one person who could do it, it would be Rachel Fucking Amber.

Chloe scooted closer to Rachel and wrapped her arm around Rachel's waist. It was enough to break Rachel's focus; she pushed herself closer as well, resting her dirty hand on the hem Chloe's dress.

"So… I want to make you this promise," Chloe spoke solemnly. "Everything Max said to me, applies to us… It applied the moment you told me about your concerns about your dad being unfaithful. I want you to know I will never abandon you, Rachel Amber. I'll see you through this, and I'll be with you every step of the way because I know how it is to go through this, I went through this alone, and I won't let you go through that... and I know we made each other a lot of promises, but I mean every last one of the-"

Rachel leaned forward, her lips pushing against hers. It didn't go anyway. Rachel seemed to be acutely aware that they were sitting six feet above her girlfriend's father. They might have been dating, but they should at least have a little respect…

"I know Chloe… I do…" Rachel spoke, her lips remaining close to hers. "… and you still have… no idea how much I love you for that…"

Chloe sort of chuckled and nodded as Rachel pulled back and leaned against her, a slender arm wrapping around her waist. She exhaled and looked again at the mostly cleared gravestone.

God… she missed him so much…

"Anyways Dad…" Chloe spoke up, clearing her throat and blinking in quick succession. "This is Rachel Amber, and she's pretty much the best thing ever. I know shotguns and angry dads are mandatory dating hazards… but don't like… come to her in her dreams and haunt her or anything."

Although Rachel and Chloe laughed at the thought, Chloe hoped that he wouldn't…

"Hey, Mr. Price…" Rachel joined in, her head resting on Chloe's shoulder. "Please don't worry about your girl… I'm always going to protect her."

Chloe would probably have laughed a little at the sweet and protective way the short girl had spoken. Then she saw the look on her face. It was clear that she had meant it. After everything that had happened. Rachel had no plans on letting the past repeat itself.

Planting a kiss on Rachel's cheek, Chloe leaned back and placed her back against the tombstone. She parted her legs a little and allowed Rachel to crawl over and rest her back against Chloe's chest. Together they sat there in the sun, Chloe's arms wrapped around her Rachel, an earbud a piece as
Chloe’s mp3 player emitted soft and grim music which Sera had directed them to what felt so long ago.

They would have this quiet moment together before they had to return to reality.

Highly recommended for Chapter

Nine Inch Nails - Lights in the Sky

Chapter End Notes

End of Act One

Now get a small glimpse into where I am going. I always thought it sort of funny Max said those words to her and it did nothing to affect the timeline. Not sure what happened, but here Chloe takes those words to heart and we see the results.

Thank you for reading and all the kind words. I hope to continue to hear from you all as we progress.

Next chapter: Rachel Amber and Chloe Price: The Blackwell Queens.
The sun was about to rise, and so that in her mind she had to hurry.

Feeling sort of a bit of badass as she clambered over a rotten cedar tree which fell probably a decade ago, she fell down into the dew soaked grass and ferns and mud which coated the damp Pacific Northwest forest floor with a small 'ugh' which escaped her lips as pain shot through her ass from the fall she took. She pulled herself up and carried onward up the sloping embank, taking in the dark woods which were starting to lighten after spend an hour and a half trekking through.

As she pushed herself further up the ridge towards her final destination, she emitted a small cough which sent a raven scampering overhead, unseen in the dark skies over her head but heard by its call. She sighed miserably. It seemed as though she somehow had gotten a cold in the middle of June and she wasn't entirely sure that happened. Totally unfair, but whatever… just had to take the ups with the downs, she supposed.

She paused to lean against the nearest cedar tree. With the sharp scent of the tree permeating in her nose, she reached into her bag to withdraw a bottle of water. Without any sort of grace she squirted a blast and looked around at the dark woods. She had been making good time and she still had a good thirty-five minutes before she reached her destination.

She was going to owe her Dad something good for Father's Day for waiting up at 1am and driving her to the edge of the forest. She was not entirely sure what he would like, though. He was a man who had everything. As long as she didn't get him a damn tie or something, he'd usually be happy. But really, this was super nice of him to do for her.

Placing her water bottle back into her bag, she pushed onwards through the rolling mist permeating over the forest floor.

She walked on in virtual silence, not thinking of anything in particular unlike usual where she was constantly in the process of overanalysing absolutely everything. It was rare for her to get these quiet moments. It seemed every day she got older her life got louder and louder, until it left her dazed and lost and even lonelier then before. Worse still there seemed no answer, no magic fix to this… simmering loneliest she had been ensnared in, which she feed until it became a self-perpetuating monster.

Looking at her phone and reading the time was 4:51am, she quickened the pace up the final route to the ridge overlook. She stepped on a branch, cracking it. She froze as she heard the sound of bushes rattling. She could make out the outline of a doe fleeing. She wished she could pause and trail it to see where it ended up, but she had places to be as the animal had.

As she stepped out of the tree line, muddied, a little battered by the brush and her nose running, she paused to take in final destination, a small smile crossing onto her lips.

The sun was rising over Mount Rainer.

Quickening her pace she made her way towards the overlook and paused as soon she reached the edge. In the face of black mass of isolated misery that filled her, she felt… good as she stood there.
watching the golden hour make it's final approach. It was like everything was right where it belong; like she found a place to belong, if only for the moment.

"Wowser…” she whispered to no one except for herself.

Pulling off her beanie to allow a tangled mess of chestnut hair to fall in her face, Max Caulfield shook her head and reached into her bag to retrieve her camera for her naturalist photo shoot. She brought her hand over her nose and gently wiped it. She was about to put it away when she noticed the small stream of blood running from her nostril.

How… very strange. She was fairly sure that this was her first nose bleed since she was 13ish…

As strange as it was, Max dismissed it easily redirected her focus back to gathering her bearings. A little blood was worth the sacrifice to be standing here overlooking this vista.

Max looked out on the valley between the Cliffside she stood on and the mountain far off from her as a small sprinkling of rain fell over her. As alone and as scared as she was here in the middle of nowhere; the world was silent and still, just as she always liked it; and soon this moment - easily washed away and lost forever to the endless march of time - would be captured by her and her alone.

Exhaling as pushed her isolation aside, Max raised her beaten up vintage camera and started her work. The only real friend she had in this life.

...

...

At seven in the morning, the alarm in Dorm 228 came in the form of a wailing synthesizer and the sound of a man chanting like a maniac. It was enough to drag Rachel Amber from out of her deep sleep.

Oil remove
Shred and tear
Radiation vapor air
It’s the fear
So unclear
Man in motion
Going nowhere
In our homes
Stuck in the face
Spread the dirt to populace
Yellow journal yellow journal
Set the pace feel the rage
Manifestations of a sort
So insidious off the point
Simple solution
Never confusion
Sport a gun
Kill a cop
Crazy world of weary thought
So receive me
I've had enough
"Rot and assimilate!" Rachel heard Chloe mumble over the next line from underneath her.

"Hot to annihilate!" Rachel echoed her immediately like it was fucking second nature.

Together the Queen and Queen Consort of Blackwell Academy broke down into wild fit of laughter. They had rotted their mind getting stoned and listening to Skinny Puppy for the past month and now pretty much every line Nivek Ogre shrieked and drone was firmly entrenched into their young, brutalized minds. With everything that had happened even so long after the fact, she supposed that they needed outlets.

Pulling head out of Chloe's comfy as fuck tits, Rachel blinked rapidly and examined Chloe who was willfully keeping her eyes clamped shut so that she could try to catch as much sleep as she could.

With a small smirk, Rachel yanked the blanket off Chloe, revealing her black sleeping shirt and plaid boxer shirts, and her long legs.

"Oh look, more plaid," Rachel gaily observed, snapping the waistband to annoy Chloe. "My girlfriend, the uber lesbo stereotype…"

That earned her a closed eyed middle finger and a muttered "Eat me, Gaychel."

As she pushed herself forward and sat on the edge of the bed, Rachel laughed slightly and pushed her hair out of her eyes as she figured out what there Sunday would entail. They had some serious prep for next weekend. The two of them would be throwing a Party at American Rust. They would also head to a couple thrift shops she'd been scoping out for. See if there was anything there worth picking up.

They were out of weed too, so it would be off to a visit with Chloe's dealer, Frank Whoever-The-Fuck-He-Was, with the cool dog, and that creepy fucking borderline pedophile stare he'd get whenever she was around.

Chloe said he was alright, but she didn't trust him. Then again, she didn't really trust anyone who was outside this bed. Rachel usually gave Chloe the money for drugs and waited several yards away and ignored the stares he sent her way.

It was sort of an affirmation that she was not the only one bothered by Frank though. Whenever Chloe and she hit the Two Whales with Sera working and Frank was there, she always noticed her Mom's attitude shifted. It was sort of like Sera was ready to destroy Frank for unknowingly getting too close to her world. Chloe had confided into her that Frank and Sera knew each other, but Sera hadn't willfully discussed it in detail. They were former associates as Dad would put it, and neither of them was pleased with each other.

Speaking of Sera, with shopping down and drugs acquired, it would be time for lunch at the Two Whales. Sera would be working this afternoon and with Chloe and her ready to hit the road, she was attempting to get in as much time as she could in with Sera. Sera was nearly three years clean now; stronger then the frail women she was when they first met. Still she was shy, and very insecure, but she was very much on a skyward trajectory now and that in Rachel's opinion meant she'd have to pick something nice up for her.

She might as well splurge a little. Money was no problem for them these days.
Mom and Dad saw to that with a six figure life insurance policy each they took out on each other. It was just the typical highly organized and financially responsible shit parents did. For Dad, however, it was blood money which he didn't want to touch. So he put it into a trust for her which she had a certain amount of freedom to access it. With Chloe and her plan to hit the road this summer now back on track and her birthday approaching, dad was on the verge of signing the account over to her completely. Of course she had to promise to be responsible with that.

At the risk of sounding like a fucking cliché, she'd have preferred to have her Mom back.

She fucking missed Mom so much, but the only thing keeping those thoughts to the back burner was remaining locked on the future. The money, as far as she was concerned, was Chloe's and hers, used to survive the bay for the duration of their stay and the rest going into their escape. They'd get a nice little place in Santa Monica, find some stupid little jobs and look for what they wanted for the rest of their lives.

With a hella amount of luck together, they would achieve the dream.

What was happening here was well beyond some high school romance. She felt it, Chloe felt it. Rachel's hypothesis of two damaged souls coming to together to form a single perfect one seemed to be truer each day. It just felt right… like they belonged together. It was like a ‘no Rachel without Chloe and Chloe without Rachel’ sort of deal.

That was not to say that there weren't tense moments between them. They both had tempers, were stubborn and when angered hard to get off that train of thought. As bad as it got, Chloe and her would always back down and find a way around their fight. If it was them against the world, it didn't help either of them to be fighting too long and too seriously. Fighting Chloe sort of like fighting herself… it was just unnatural.

Quietly Rachel examined the still sprawled out Chloe appreciatively. Ignoring her more mediocre fashion choices, Chloe was in the midst of a transformation of sorts. Gone was the lanky sort of underdeveloped tomboy figure Chloe possessed when they first met and replacing it was curves – beautiful curves - a washboard flat stomach and a modest increase in breast size which made everything all the more comfortable. Her hair was grown out a little more and gone was any trace of her natural dirty blonde. She had gone all out and dyed all her hair blue.

Well, almost all her hair was blue. Rachel tried to convince Chloe to dye a landing strip blue as well; for the efforts of her creativity, all Rachel got was a smack on the tit.

God, Chloe could be a real bitch. It was just an idea…

Leaning forward over her girl, Rachel leaned forward, her hand running through Chloe's hair, earning her a sweet smile. Even with after two months of getting used to it, Rachel thought it was the fucking hottest thing ever. She was half tempted to dye her own hair, but she decided she'd leave that as Chloe's thing: the vibrant industrial punk girl with the brooding natural girlfriend… The patron saints of the Dead Parent Club.

Okay… so that got a little dark… She had taking up Chloe's habit of going to places that didn't need going to.

As she continued to hold herself over Chloe, she looked her in the eye and saw the expression of lust dripping from her. She watched as Chloe's legs parted and closed… parted and closed. Her breathing was shallower as she held her eyes on Rachel as one hand pushed lower and lower until it was on her visibly twitching pelvis. Just from seeing Chloe's flushed cheeks, she was radiating heat.
Rachel smirked and leaned in for a kiss. It didn't take much to realize where this was going; but if Chloe was game… so was she…

Contrary to popular opinion of Blackwell Academy; Chloe and she weren't fucking up a storm in their shared dorm. That was not to say they didn't when the urge overwhelmed them and they had the time; but in general the two of them tried their best to behave as neither of them wanted to return to their respective home unless they had to. Rachel's being haunted by the ghost of Rachel Amber and lonely father, and Chloe a newly remarried mother, whose new husband played had an indirect hand in the death of her mother.

They had both heard all the stories pervade around the school usually by the guys who thought it was hot that they had hot lesbians at their school that dyke out on a moment's notice. As rude as that was, they did totally do that, just not at the whims of others; ad Chloe wasn't helping with how perverse she could be about it. As sure as the sun rose in the east, Chloe Price was going to relay every lewd and salacious rumor she heard to Rachel to test the waters.

Besides, they had plenty of places to do each other off campus. They went to her house if they wanted to romantically made love, they went to Chloe's house when they wanted to fuck and smoke up, they had the truck for quickies and they went to American Rust if they were in the mood to fuck each other into the ground. Sometimes, they just wanted to get a little perverse.

Call the two of them whatever the fuck you want; but you couldn't say they weren't organized…

It had taken just over six months of dating before the two of them remembered, or rather, voiced the unspoken sex question. Between the loss of her Mom still being so fresh and the fact that Chloe's last sexual liaison had been with the one who did that. Chloe's apt description of "the lamest eleven and a half seconds of her life" was the icing on that cake.

As awful as Chloe made it out to be, even that description was not enough to stem any sort of anger Rachel felt for not having her first. Nothing short of visiting Eliot Hampden in jail armed with a slotted screwdriver to jam into his fucking face would satisfy that anger, so she pushed it back out of her mind. Rachel supposed she was just looking for any excuse to shove something sharp through his fucking eye.

So between their hang ups the two of them just sort of avoided it altogether until one night they stopped avoiding it and Rachel Amber lost her virginity to Chloe (literally) Fucking Price in the bathroom right in the fucking middle of an evening dinner with Sera and Dad. One moment she was passing her Dad the salad and the next she was dragging Chloe away and the next moment after that she was propped up on the bathroom counter and being eaten out by Chloe. It was perfect… but she had to admit now it was strange how things went.

Holy fuck… poor Chloe though… she looked like she was going to faint every time she had to talk when they returned. She was worried she wouldn't be able to get the scent of Rachel's sex on her breath even after chugging a quarter of a bottle of mouthwash. She was convinced James and Sera would somehow catch a whiff and that would pretty much make her a marked girl from then on out.

That, Rachel reflected, was a pretty fun evening.

Pulling back from the deep kiss she had pulled Chloe into, Rachel pushed one hand lower, gripping the waistband of her boxers. She took in the delicious sight of Chloe's eyes dilating as she realized what she was wanting, she was going to get. As though there was still a possibility Rachel would ever say no to fucking the hell out of Chloe. It was nearly two years into their relationship, and Rachel still felt like Chloe appreciated every moment they had.
Fuck, it really was love…

"Say it, Price..." she toyed with Chloe her lips still so frustratingly close to the girl who she held a dominant position over.

The physical dominance Rachel now held over her girlfriend was fleeting power. She knew that at any moment Chloe could flip the script and push Rachel down into submission and fuck her brains out. She was being generous, that girl was a quick, consummate learner and she could get Rachel twisted right around her index finger… and middle finger… and ring finger… and thumb… but that thumb was always in a support role. All it took was an expression of dark lust on Chloe's face, and the next moment Rachel would be face down in the pillow and dumbstruck as she tried to figure out how she ended up there.

This time it seemed like she would not be at a risk of that happening. It was early morning and Chloe was in a nice sleepy and lazy mood. It meant Rachel got to play with her favourite toys.

"Fuck me..." Chloe groaned out, her pelvis pushing up upwards into Rachel's cupped hand. "...really?"

Unable to contain herself at the sight of her perfect little mess, Rachel smirked even wider as her slipped her hand inside Chloe's boxers and held it there. Her fingers pushed into her lips, her thumb resting against a nearly solid clit. She took in the expression of bliss which she wore; and she could feel Chloe already on the verge of gushing all over the palm of her hand.

She loved that word: *gushing*.

It was so unbelievably lewd when you used it in this exact context. It was Chloe's best state of being while they fucked; it was the perfect affirmation of Rachel's hard work and endurance. If she wasn't *gushing*, then Rachel knew something was wrong. Sex was a perfect gauge for Rachel to see where Chloe was emotionally. Both of them were fucked up messes and needed to monitor each other carefully.

There appeared to be some defiance on Chloe's part as she refused to say the words still. Both of them did that when they were placed into a situation where control was being lost. Rachel pulled her lips away from Chloe's and wrapped her mouth around the side of Chloe's neck. She felt Chloe jerk as she gnashed her teeth into skin as her tongue gliding in circles. Sometimes they broke each other's skin, bleeding each other as they fucked.

...Pain and pleasure had a way to break down resistance...

For the record, they were not into some fucking bullshit dominant and submissive thing like that bullshit book millions of Mom's across the world rubbed their gashes raw to. They just liked to play and mix the roles up. Spontaneity was the fire that drove Rachel Amber's desires for her Chloe; and nothing was more amusing then the usually confident bordering on cocky Chloe Price brought to her fucking knees with simplest but most intimate of touches.

"I want you to moan it for me, Price," she growled lowly as she retracted her mouth and returned back to her place hovering over Chloe's lips. "You made me say it last time; it's your turn now."

It didn't just take much to break Chloe's sleepy resistance. She just had to push the right button in the perfect way.

"My…b-body is an extension to yours. Yours to do as you want..." Chloe could barely gasp out as Rachel thumb ran in slowly methodical circles into her twitching clit. "Everything I have is..."
yours… Everything I am yours… Please, Rach… just don't make me beg anymore…”

Perhaps it was a little cringy to the outsider looking in, but it was their affirmation that they were each other's and no one could break that. With the magic words had been spoken; the girl underneath her knew her place this morning and would not dare to question it. Rachel now had a free hand to do as she pleased to Chloe Price.

It was so perfect.

Snaking her free arm between the mattress and Chloe, Rachel pushed her fingers inside Chloe at an agonizingly slow speed. She savoured every nerve in Chloe tighten and contract, every jerk in Chloe's body, the way she tried and failed to suppress the gasp, the lulled tongue which Rachel planted her mouth over to sloppily kiss. She felt Chloe's thighs close on her as Rachel reached the limits her fingers could.

She pulled out to the surface as she pushed back inside, fingernails scrapping alone the rigged walls inside her. She watched in sweet satisfaction as Chloe melted in front of her and around her fingers. Every moment Rachel reached the limits, she jerked a little deeper, a little further inside. She could feel the shaking Price emitted and the whimper which escaped her lips.

"Don't… stop, Angel…" Chloe sobbed out as she managed to form her thoughts into stuttering words. "Don't you dare fucking stop…"

But Rachel had to decline the request.

Although Chloe was too fucked up on hormones to notice, the hallways of the dormitory had gotten loud with the sounds of their classmates. She could hear Victoria Chase only a few feet away giving her minions shit. Rachel had come to love the way she beat that Courtney bitch down. She could hear Steph was playing something loud on her PlayStation and Dana somewhere out there talking loud to Juliet, and Rachel just fucking knew that one fucking slip up from the girl moaning underneath would mean they'd be the talk of the school yet fucking again. It would of course not be anything new, but it would be an annoying way to end the school year.

She could not help but smirk as she toyed with the idea of making Chloe cry out. Dana would probably kick in the door and beat Rachel senseless for what she was doing to her friend. That, or join in. That girl was surprisingly ambiguous and was growing harder and harder to read even for Rachel.

Feeling bad she started something without letting Chloe get to finish, Rachel found an evil little plot brewing in her brain as an inevitable result. It was a new little game the two of them could play, and if there was one thing Chloe and Rachel liked; it was the games they played together.

Pulling her mouth away Chloe's, Rachel guided her tongue down Chloe's exposed stomach. She could feel Chloe's hand in her hair, trying to push her down lower and lower. Finally, as she looked up at the flustered blue haired girl above her, Rachel dragged her tongue painfully slow down her clit a single time. A taste… a tease for the little game she had in store.

Pulling her head up, pulling her fingers out of the shocked and obviously disappointed girl.

Rachel leaned in and planted her lips against Chloe's. She could see the steady anger in her eyes at the interruption. She felt the small nip Chloe gave her on her bottom lip a warning that there was going to be hell to pay for this. It was exactly what she wanted.

Pulling her lips away from Chloe's, she slowly lipped her sex stained fingers.
"Don't bathe, and don't clean yourself. I want you to stew in this…" Rachel commanded her girlfriend as she pulled her fingers out of her mouth. "This was a preview for later… we'll finish this properly tonight, right Chlo?"

When Rachel used Chlo, Chloe knew her girlfriend had meant business.

Chloe in no position to agree to anything right now; she was in a physical and mental mess at the moment. She was sweat stained and oozing sex right now. She had had an adorably stupid dopey grin which was completely endearing. Slowly, her heaving, Chloe nodded, one hand resting against her breast as she seemed to be tweaking herself for a little extra stimulation. Rachel pulled her hand away and dragged her up to a sitting position. As fun as it was to watch her play with herself, they had shit to done first.

"Fu-fuck me… o-oh my God… You're the fucking devil, Rach…" Chloe muttered to her, leaning into Rachel's neck to plant her lips on her skin.

Rachel nodded, offering her broken girl the most devilish grin she could just for good measure.

"I am, yes… and the only soul I want to possess is yours…" Rachel shot back, tapping Chloe's soaked boxer crotch, and watching in great amusement as Chloe yelped and bounced in place.

As Chloe rolled her eyes, Rachel could not help but blush. She… probably took that a little too far.

"Too cheesy?" she asked her girl.

Pushing her sweaty blue hair out of her face, Chloe eyed Rachel with a small smile and shook her head.

"Perfect cheesy," Chloe reassured, her voice jittery.

The girls laughed and the two of them shakily got up from off the bed, their minds drunk on endorphins and lust as they directed their attention to getting dress and the occasional lapse into grab-ass as they prepared to face the world yet again.

It was Sunday, June 10th 2012 and Chloe Elizabeth Price and Rachel Dawn Amber had a fucking Bay to conquer today.

…

…

**Song Credits go to** [Skinny Puppy - Assimilate](http://example.com)

Chapter End Notes

Act 2 has begun with a bang. A good bang this time!

Thanks for reading and comments, always flattering to get the response I have gotten so far. Hard to believe it's been a month and four days since I started this. Something
about this series and the fandom in general has definitely got me enthusiastic about writing again, and I hope you're continuing to enjoy. Even when I do awful things to good people.

When I started this, I drew out a timeline map to explain how we all got to this point. I'll probably post it later as we progress deeper. It's still a really early.

Next Chapter: Rachel, Chloe, Sera.
"So… rumour has it Steph asked you to help her study for finals."

"Yeah..."

"Think it's another elaborate rouse to get you to fall madly for her?"

"Yeah..."

"She's aware I still exist, right?"

"Yup!"

Taking a drag of her cigarette, Chloe glanced to Rachel as she too smoked in relative silence and looked away from her girl.

The pair of them was leaning against their truck just outside the Two Whales waiting on that shitty RV belonging to Frank to pull in. Chloe gave a second glance to Rachel and found her smirking as though it was pretty amusing for her to listen to Chloe's creeping work around to see if Rach was aware of guys and girls who were sniffing around her girl.

It was hard work, protecting her Queen, but someone had to do it. She was just glad she wasn't alone in having this protective nature. Rach had a temper that dwarfed fucking anything she could ever have. She'd seen the flare ups whenever she spoke to Dana, which was hella weird. She was pretty flirty, but it all seemed like her personality.

"She's thirsty as fuck... I swear if she wasn't so cute, and wasn't so good to us in the early days I'd probably punch her in the box... well... maybe..." Chloe complained out loud as she exhaled a plume of smoke. "Think we can turn a Blackwell girl gay for a night just for Steph in time for the rager?"

Tapping her cigarette, Rach ran her hand through her long blonde hair which she had pulled back in a loose ponytail today. Quietly Chloe inspected her best friend and love appreciatively. Gone was the short stuff cutie she got to lord her height over. She had a serious growth spurt the past year and now Chloe only had maybe an inch on her. She was in model range now; if that was even something she still wanted to do these days. Since Rose... priorities had a way of changing. Expectations lowered and ambitions as well.

It wasn't just physical in which Rachel had changed. There was a much more... serious air to her. The outsider apparently saw the same old Rachel. The beautiful mystery, the riddle they could never quite solve. Chloe, however, knew the truth. She knew it was just a mask meant to hide behind now. She and Chloe had seen the ugliest human nature could offer and they were never going to be the same after that night.

"I bet if we tell Courtney we'll put a good word in for her, she'll do it," she heard Rachel next to her say as she smoked. "God bless gay-for-pay."
Chloe eyed Rachel with a slight grin. One of these days she was going to have to ask Rach what the deal was with her hate for Courtney Wagner. For now, she couldn't care as she noticed Rachel's mood shift cold just as the two of them watched Frank Bowers RV pulling into the parking lot.

Just because Chloe told Rachel she thought Frank Bowers was a good guy, it did not necessarily mean that Chloe liked being around him.

Outside of Joyce, Frank Bowers was one of the last real connections to the 'isolation days' as Chloe had come to call the days between Max's departure to the day she met Rachel. The only thing that got her through those lonely years was being in various states of being stones, and that meant she ended developing the quasi dealer-buyer friendship with Frank.

She didn't really need to do this anymore as Rachel reminded her. The Vortex Club was fighting tooth and nail to claw Rachel and by extension Chloe into their ranks. As fucking awful as she thought a club was, they had all the connections they needed to the Arcadia Bay drug scene and none this weird face-to-face interactions.

For now, she tried to make the deals on her own. Especially when his object of fascination, as Rachel pointed out within their third meeting was Rachel herself. Call her a prude all you would fucking like to, she really didn't care. The fact was Frank was thirty-something year old man was ogling a at the time 15 year old girl, and Chloe wasn't going to act like it was somehow a okay fucking thing.

With this creepy encounter so soon after the whole Hampden ordeal, Chloe was not exactly in the mood to let either of them ended up getting potentially hurt again. Even if Frank was a softy deep inside, she was just not going to chance. Keeping things hidden was what got Rose killed, and Chloe was determined never to let something of that magnitude happen to them again. Not if she could do something.

So with that in mind, she went to see Sera about it alone.

Sera was not Chloe's first choice in adults to go to about this. No, her first choice was going straight to James; but after she cooled down a little and had a chance to think over the matter, she decided on Sera. Given Sera's history with associating with him, it felt like an act of good faith in Frank's intentions.

Maybe she was just being paranoid with Frank; but who the fuck knew exactly what went on in Frank's head. If she took her concerns to straight to James, he'd go ballistic and start a witch hunt and that would mean weed would be so much harder to find and a fuck ton more expensive. That would hella suck.

While Sera didn't have that sort of power, she did keep her ear to ground and knew the right moment to intervene. She flat out told Chloe that Chloe's ability to get weed came dead last in priority to keep both Rachel and her safe, and that the moment she didn't like any of this she would go straight to James. There would be no room for arguments, the only reason she did not do right off the bat was out of respect of Chloe's vigilance.

So, just like that Chloe had obtained a second mother. That was kind of a nice turn of events.

It didn't take much to convince Frank to sell to them within a stone's throw of the Two Whales. It just took Sera to name drop that there was a growing popularity in chilli and it became a place Frank spent a lot of time at. Convenience was a drug dealer's friend apparently, and with that, the buys Chloe made with Rachel were held while Sera could keep an eye on it.
A gentle nudge caught her attention from Rachel. She had dropped her cigarette and had a wad of cash in hand outstretched towards Chloe. She was making a point not to notice Frank was out of the van and approaching the pair of them, a small bag in hand and that stupid obvious look on his face he had as he noticed Rachel was there.

"Hey... I'm going to go get a table for us and bug Sera, alright?" Rachel spoke uncomfortably as Chloe took the money.

As soon as Chloe nodded, she had earned a swift kiss on her cheek from her girl, and with that Rachel shoved her hands in her pockets, nearly marching off towards the entrance, leaving Chloe and the now despondent Frank alone.

Chloe turned back to face Frank and wondered why Frank never hit on her. She wasn't interested, but it was a curiosity if he was into young girls. She probably gave off a super gay vibe. If that was the case, she probably didn't even have to come out in front of Joyce and David on their wedding rehearsal day in front of Dickhead David's crusty old homophobic (at least that was what she assumed, she never got a straight answer) family.

Of course Rachel was there as her guest/date, and of fucking course she found a way to make it worse. That day she pretended that Chloe's outing was the first time she heard about it and decided to confess her own love with her right then and fucking there. It was a good thing Joyce, and surprisingly the douchebag were cool with it, or at least knew better than to argue beyond the obvious disruption they made.

Now that was a fun day.

"Frank, my main man," Chloe greeted as brightly as she could, holding out her hand to high five. "What's shaking, dude?"

Frank, it seemed, was not in the mood to high five. He was never in the mood to high five. Shame, she was a hella high fiver. She had good fucking references and everything.

"Price, you got what I want?" Frank demanded.

Chloe resisted the urge to smirk and say 'Yeah, Rachel' before she remember he was still a required service. In the same way you didn't piss off the mailman, trash men or firefighters, you didn't piss off Frank for his weed access. At least not until an alternate source had opened up.

Instead Chloe flashed the money causally.

"You got the quarter?" she called back to him as he reached out and took the cash.

She watched silently as Frank counted out the handful of ten dollar bills. Appearing to be satisfied, he nodded, pocketing the money and handed quarter bag over to her, which she immediately shoved into the front of her pants much to Frank's chagrin. Chloe winced. Their weed now smelled like sex. Gross…

Chloe inwardly grinned. Maybe Chloe flavoured weed might be a huge aphrodisiac for Rach…

"Living large on the rich girl's money I see. I guess it's better than you beggin' me for freebies..." Frank muttered to her as Chloe straightened herself up.

"Still taking money from teenagers I see. Hella hardcore, man. Everybody watch out for fucking Scarface here…” Chloe shot back at him.
Frank narrowed his eyes, but he did not fall for the obvious attempt to get a rise out of him.

"Speaking of which, I heard you're on campus now. Heat's cooled down after North graduated and we're reorganized and looking to enter that market," Frank spoke again as he tilted his head slightly. "Are you both interested in making some cash on the side? Might be good for you... not having to leech off that girl."

She knew what this was. Classic attempt in twisting about the insecurities she had to use against her. Chloe already had enough issues as it was, she wasn't about to let her fucking dealer make her fall right into her pocket using pride against her.

Nope, that wasn't happening here.

"You still work for Merrick, and even if you weren't no fucking way," she attempted diffuse the conversation. "Besides, work would totally spoil our friendship, Frank!"

Frank's expression soured, his unspoken motive to actually make the offer was left lingering unspoken between the two of them. Chloe did not blink, did not offer any chance to Frank for exploitation. After a few moment moments, Frank shook his head and took a step back from his client.

"Fine by me," he growled dismissively as he turned away. "You Blackwell brats are a dime a fucking dozen anyway… just thought I'd offer my best customers first."

Watching as Frank retreated back into his RV, Chloe pulled her phone out and slowly made her way to the diner, her fingers tapping out a message.

*You* - Heads up frank just made a job offer 4 Rach n me.

By the time she reached the door, she got a message back.

*Sera* - I'll handle it when he comes in. Thanks.

Glancing back to see if Frank had left his RV yet, Chloe exhaled and stepped into the diner. She could only hope Sera could handle it, but she had James's contact info highlighted just in case.

…

…

Scanning the to-do list she had started writing out in April, Rachel checked off camping gear. They were now one step closer to their Pacific Northwest tour.

The taste of freedom which had lost all its appeal the previous year was back on for them. With their hearts sufficiently healed, the urge to leave had returned; and so since late April Chloe and she had been preparing for the trip. There was far more to it then they originally thought there would be back when they first met. With age came more realistic expectations and a better understanding that even a few months away took a bit of planning in advance.

As excited as she was, there had been some challenges. They had no challenges with the means or the financial aspects to it, but instead it came from worse difficulties outside of material need: family.

For Chloe, her Mom was a real source of resistance. Nothing Chloe could do or say was approved
of by Joyce, who insisted they wait until next year.

Despite Chloe thinking she was being a 'domineering fascist', Rachel didn't see it that way. Joyce was a mother who was watching her daughter fleeing the nest, and regardless of Chloe and Joyce's situation, Joyce was never going to not love her. Rachel genuinely liked Joyce, she was a sweet, devoted woman who had would stop at nothing to protect her own, and that was something she had to respect. She probably could have done better in the new husband department though, but no one was perfect.

At the end of the day it took her Dad of all people stepping in to alleviate the concerns Joyce and David had for the journey Chloe was about to embark on. He confirmed that the truck only looked like a piece of shit, that they had money to get home in a pinch and all the communications they needed to keep in contact. The fact that Dad was willing to stand in the same room as David Madsen spoke volumes, and with the reassurance of James Amber given freely, some of Joyce's concerns had been cast aside… at least some of them anyway.

After all, Mom's would be Mom's…

As for her situation, well it was a little easier to process for all parties. Dad was well aware this was coming since before Mom had died and was prepared to let them go then. Now he had time to process it and had come to accept this desire. He probably didn't like this, but he was okay with it. In the past month he had been pulling Chloe aside for 'talks'. Chloe, not one to keep things from her explained that they were mostly just him dumping his concerns out in the open and Chloe trying her best to soothe them. He wasn't just interfering, he was just… scared; and when James Amber was scared, Rachel knew it meant something.

Sera had been a similar story as Dad was, but it seemed as though she was much more… cowed by the past to speak out. Rachel honestly wished Sera felt comfortable enough with expressing how she felt, but even years into their growing relationship, Sera still thought she had no right to dictate what Rachel wanted to do. For the most part she was right to feel that way; but that didn't mean the daughter wanted to not hear what her biological mother needed to say.

Rachel had genuinely come to love this woman in a way that was unique and didn't have to replace her Mom in anyway. It seemed so impossible, so unlikely in the aftermath of what happened to Mom; but she knew her Mom and she knew with Chloe's help that Rose Amber wouldn't want her daughter to just give up on the blossoming reconnection she was building with Sera.

It was as Chloe had put it: "You have to learn to trust again, so why not start with Sera?"

For a blue haired mouthpiece, Chloe Price was a real softy.

Rachel was well aware of the experience Chloe had in the field of parental loss. She had talked Rachel out of some very dark places, and the promise she had made never wavered. Not once did Rachel ever feel alone, or isolated, and she adored her girl for that.

This love was another motivation why they were back on with the trip. Unspoken between them was that they would end up in Seattle. With everything that Chloe had done for her these past years, Rachel knew it was time for the same sort of healing Chloe had offered to her, had to be passed back. So the friendship between Chloe Price and Max Caulfield had to finally be addressed.

She had heard the many stories from Chloe, and it filled Rachel with a certain sort of envy. She moved around a lot as a child. It came with the job her Dad had. She never got to plant her roots long enough to form a friendship in a similar vein that Chloe and Max got to have. With everything she had been told Rachel found that for the first time in a long time the opinion of a stranger
someone else actually mattered. She hoped Chloe and Max could reconnect, so that Chloe could have another best friend back in life, and perhaps Rachel could have a chance at gaining a friend out of this encounter as well.

After the Caulfield dilemma was put to rest, Rachel had another goal for the coming school year: helping to mend what was broken between Chloe and Joyce. They both needed each other, and it was wrong to see them like this. It was never that great between them, even in the lead up to David's gun being stolen.

She didn't know William Price well, but she knew enough to know what was going on between the two great loves of his life was the last thing he'd ever want for them.

Watching Sera as she refreshed another customer's coffee, Rachel tilted her head as she heard the door jingle open. In came Chloe, that bright confident smile of hers making her melt a little. Noticing Rachel watching her, Chloe widened her grin and put a little swagger into her step.

God, she was such a fucking cutie.

As Sera too looked Chloe's way, Sera smiled brightly for her daughter's girlfriend. They honestly had a very sweet sort of relationship in their own right. Sera would call her 'daughter-in-law', which always managed to put a blush on both their faces at the almost convinced way she spoke. It almost always put a smile on her Dad's face, so it was worth it.

"Well if it isn't Sera, my other main girl. How are you today?" Chloe greeted Sera with a side hug.

"I'm doing fine, sweetheart," Sera greeted Chloe warmly as Chloe let go and slid into the seat opposite of Rachel. "Let me guess, Clubhouse, side order of fries and coffee?"

Chloe only smiled as a confirmation.

"Can you add a Sprite to the order?" Chloe politely requested.

Sera nodded and with a smile to Rachel, she left the girls to their own devices. Chloe stretched out, resting her legs on the opposite seat next to her. Her face sort of scrunched as she seemed to be thinking on something which Rachel knew was only a matter of time before she said it-

"Are we really inviting Vicky and her cheer squad for next weekend's rager?" Chloe suddenly blurted out.

Sipping her tea, Rachel looked over the brim to take in Chloe's natural mistrust of Victoria Chase. To say they had a confrontational relationship was drastically understating it. The only reason Chloe wasn't tormenting Victoria was Rachel's request to keep the peace and that Chloe was still under probation from Wells'. She never quite forgot that Victoria had tried to drug her girlfriend at the play, but she certainly overlooked she swapped the tainted tea.

It was silly anger, but she supposed everyone had that one person they irrationally hated. Rachel knew she had that in Courtney Who-Gives-A-Fuck…

"Yes, Beth," she said, smiling as she watched her girl cringe at her official pet name. "She's been… surprisingly good to us last year. It's better that we end the year on a good note so that we don't start the next one with her breathing down our necks."

"But why would she want to come?" Chloe asked out loud. "Junkyards aren't clearly her thing."

Chloe was right, they really weren't and that was kind of the point.
"The idea is to extend an olive branch to her. If she doesn't want it, she cannot stand there and say we did not offer the invitation," Rachel answered her with a small smile spreading. "Besides, the Vortex Club is coming and she'd be committing social suicide if she didn't show up."

Chloe sort of frowned at the idea of the Vortex Club being there. Having spent so long as an outsider, she was still getting used to the idea that she was officially a popular kid. She could hang out with Justin and skater bros as well as Steph and Mikey roleplaying all she liked but at the end of the day she was still going to be held to a higher standard because of who she was seeing. She literally had the rising star of the cheerleaders Dana Ward Juliet Watson hanging and off her as a friend.

Rachel reckoned that was all part of her charm. Chloe wouldn't just change who she was even if her situation had changed. It was something else Rachel sort of came to envy in her girlfriend. She felt so… fake in comparison.

"Win-win, I guess," she heard Chloe cut threw her self-doubt.

Rachel looked back up to her and smiled.

"Chloe Price, my eternal optimist..." Rachel lightly teased her. "That's something I never thought I'd hear you say."

Before a smart-assed response could be formulated and allowed to escape Chloe's lips, Rachel leaned over the table and planted a small kiss. She smirked at the silence she made and slumped back into her seat, her hand reaching out to rest on her outstretched legs.

Smiling briefly at Chloe, Rachel looked up and noticed her Mom… Sera… no… her Mom was returning to them, a plate of fries in one and her chicken salad sandwich in one hand and a coffee pot clutched in her other.

"I'll have yours out in a bit, Chloe," Sera spoke as she placed Rachel's lunch in front of her and poured Chloe her coffee. "So… when are you two leaving? I haven't gotten much of a definitive response from anyone… and I would like to be able to see you off."

Rachel ignored the small guilt twisting inside of her. Yes, she had been pretty vague to Sera about the date in an attempt not to cause her problems. She still had to manually remember that Sera was not as delicate as she was when they first met. That she wouldn't just blow apart at the seams over something like this. She had her shit really together now and she deserved a lot of respect for that; certainly enough to treat her like a proper adult.

Chloe exchanged a knowing look with Rachel before she turned to look up at Sera.

"June 30th if it all goes to plan," Chloe announced to her as she snatched a couple fries off her plate. "You're gonna be a great summer. It's two months without having to deal with the biggest pests in your life."

Sera sort of nodded half-heartedly, audibly exhaling. Like James and Joyce before her, she too was worried about this trip, but she couldn't exactly express this feeling. It must have been a terrible feeling to have. Wanting to say something but not sure if she was in the right to say it.

"Well, perhaps I've grown fond of both of you girls being annoyances..." Sera spoke back quietly, sort of teasing. She glanced to Rachel and added, "... and if I say that I will miss you both terribly, would you reconsider?"

Sera paused and clamped her mouth shut. She looked sort of ashamed she had voiced her thoughts.
She sort of laughed and shook her head.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure what came over me," Sera amended ruefully to the girls. "I don't intend on stopping you, but I hope you won't blame me for... well, I guess I have some reservations."

Rachel reached and took Sera's hanging free hand.

"It's okay to feel that," Rachel reassured her with a soft tone, squeezing her fingers gently. "We'll be back, I promise, Mom."

Although she stiffened a little, Sera smiled at the title her daughter had used for her. Rachel had been carefully testing the waters with that word over the past few months. Sera had put in so much time and devotion to mending everything left broken in the Amber family in the wake of Mom's death. It just seemed wrong for Rachel to not acknowledge it, and to not to take steps in her direction as well.

Perhaps... Perhaps it was okay to feel she could have had two mothers...

With Sera sort of pacified, Rachel released her grasp on her hand. A singular thought was running through her head now, and she just... had to ask.

"Hey... So can you do me a huge favour?" she asked her carefully. "Please feel free to say no if you can't deal with it..."

Looking very curiously at her daughter, Sera nodded without even a moment to consider it. Rachel exhaled and glanced to Chloe who drinking her coffee and clutching a couple new fries. She was pretending not to be part of the conversation.

Rachel turned back and looked up at Sera, who looked like she was now standing on ceremony.

"When we leave, can you... could you please check in on my Dad every so often?" Rachel requested of her. "He doesn't have many friends outside his office and... I hate the idea of him not having a barrier between his work and personal life, and I know it might not seem like it, but I don't like to see him puttering around the house all by himself..."

Rachel felt Sera's hand touch against her shoulder.

"He knows you love him, Rachel... even if you have problems relating to him," she firmly reminded the teen. "...but what do you think I should do about it?"

"I can't say for sure," Rachel shrugged as Sera's eyes' burned into hers for an answer. "Just... I don't know... get him out of the house; keep him away from work as much as you can. Do what you do when you're at our house seeing me, only without me there. He needs a friend, and I... I just think you just have a lot in common..."

The doors to the diner opened, catching both mother and daughter's attention. Quietly entering the diner was Frank. He glanced there way for a moment before he trampled off to take his place in the opposite end of the diner.

Almost like clockwork, she watched Sera's eyes narrowed at him. Rachel glanced over towards Chloe for a moment, and noticed she had remained unnaturally still as another server approached to place her lunch in front of her. Like she was sitting on a secret she actually didn't want to share with her.

It didn't take much for Rachel to know something was going on.
"I should get that," Sera spoke straightening her outfit. She looked to Rachel and added. "I'll reach out to James, when you leave… but it's all up to him… okay? I have no right to force him to do anything he isn't okay with."

As soon as Rachel nodded to her terms, Sera stepped back and silently made her way over to Frank, leaving Rachel to turn back to Chloe who was now focused completely on eating.

Rachel narrowed her eyes at her girlfriend. She had a new objective: whittle down Chloe's resistance until she said what the fuck exactly was going on between Frank, Sera and Chloe at the moment.

…

By the time Sera had reached Frank, Laura had finished taking his order; and it took away her only real excuse to be approaching him. As soon as he handed the menu back to Laura that he was staring right back at her, as though this was the last place he wanted to deal with one of his former associates.

Sera didn't hate Frank Bowers. In fact it was quite the contrary. In the sea of Damon Merrick's shit, Frank was the one sane refuge. He was a guiding voice of reason to the Merrick enterprise; he kept Damon's head on straight and was one of the few who could countermand Merrick's more drastic orders. Frank had her back on more than one occasion, and she would never forget it.

But while Frank was better than Merrick, it didn't make him a saint; and as much as she had some respect for him, it was not nearly enough to even chance her daughter on his good nature. The moment Chloe told her what was going on, that maternal instinct she kept dealing with in small flare ups suddenly and violently kicked into overdrive. This job offer to mule for Merrick was just the straw that broke the camel's back. She couldn't let that slide even if she wanted to.

"Afternoon, Frank," Sera greeted the dealer as came to a stop in front of. "How is everything?"

Small talk was not one of his favourite activities. Frank instead narrowed his eyes at her. He was trying to read her, to see if something bad was coming his way.

"Hey Sera…" Frank spoke finally, still very much on guard. "Yeah, it's all good, you?"

"I'm well, thank you," Sera returned with as much warmth as she could produce in the face of her growing desire to destroy him. "I'm going to take my break; would you mind it if I sat with you for a bit?"

Frank hesitated for a moment before he relented with a small nod. Sera emitted a ghost of a smile and took a seat. Sera sat down across from him and to two of them remained silent as Laura came back with a coffee pot in hand.

"You know, I'm kind of surprised," Frank admitted as soon as Laura left again, leaning backwards into his seat. "Damon was convinced this whole honest work and clean living Miss Arcadia Bay Junkie thing was a pile of shit that wouldn't last. That you'd hit him up for another hit any time… "

Sera folded her fingers on the table as the passive aggressive insult hit her in the face.

"There was a couple times I had weak moments… but I had motivation," she found herself confessing, deciding it was better to own it then retaliate. "Forget what Merrick thinks, what
Frank grunted non-committedly.

"Can't really say I care one way or another," Frank stated curtly as he rolled his shoulders back. "You're free to do what you want. Open a track mark or keep it closed, I don't really give a shit. The only thing I'm wonderin' right now is why the fuck you're here sitting with me, when you've been glaring at me for two fuckin' years like I'm some sort of a stain."

Sera sort of smiled at his biting comment. This was classic Frank was on display. His inability to take a position was why he was still Merrick's second. He couldn't be bothered to have a position. Positions meant you had to stand for something, and Frank could not be bothered with anything that morally taxing. But he did have a point. She had been like that to him for quite some time now.

Sera folded her fingers together on the table. She continued to stare at him, silently observing the man for a moment prior. She noticed his eyes flickering off to one side. She glanced that way and noticed Chloe had just made Rachel laugh.

"You always were nice to me... even when I was using," Sera spoke again softly. "That's why I want to do you a huge favour... that girl you keep eying over there, laughing with her girlfriend. She's off limits, Frank."

Frank's brow furrowed as Sera nudged her head in the direction of her daughter. He was not someone who liked to be told 'no'. Not without good reason. Well, Sera certainly had some good reasons.

"Yeah and why is that?" Frank asked; clearly amused by the remark the former addict had made.

"A multitude of reasons, really..." she returned, forcing the anger back inside her so that she didn't just explode like the urge told her to do. "Let's start with the obvious, she's a child and you're a 30 year old drug dealer, or how about because she's seeing someone already and that's shady thing to do. Or most importantly to your bottom line, because her last name is Amber and I want you to rack your brain real hard about why that surname should mean something to you."

Sera fell silent and watched as Frank seemed to think about it hard about what she had said. It took a few moments before he paused and squinted at her like it was insane to think that Rachel Amber and District Attorney James Amber were one in the same. The emotionless face Sera returned sort of dropped the amusement Frank might have held.

"What's this concern to you?" he demanded. "What does some rich kid with daddy issues have to do with some trash ex-junkie?"

Sera shrugged in an effort to remain as causal as she could. As much as she wanted to say what stake she had, because if Frank knew he'd more than likely back off. It was just not... wise.

"The Ambers have been good to me. Her father has been a good friend when I needed one. The Sera you see, is because of him giving a shit," Sera explained her altered version. "Believe it or not, I kind of like you Frank. Enough to warn you that James Amber isn't someone you want to deal with. He's dangerous."

Sera fell silent as Laura brought Frank his bowl of chilli. Frank did not acknowledge it. He just stared at Sera, his mouth open revealing his teeth. Once again he clearly thought this was all just some big joke.

But it wasn't a joke. Not in the slightest. James Amber's mild and monotone being was the greatest
trick he had ever conceived. The man she once loved had a great capacity to destroy if he just put his mind to it; and the moment he heard what was happening, it would not be hard to kick that trait back into gear.

"Dangerous?" Frank spoke finally. While he thought it was amusing, Frank was not an idiot. If someone he knew was saying this, he was going to take it into consideration.

Sera leaned in closer, her fingers gripping the edge of the table.

"Yes, and if you keep this up, I'm going to have to let slip to him just what seems to be on your mind these days," she warned him, her voice dropping an octave. "And one day not long after this warning is ignored, you're going to be minding your own business when you're going to get picked up by a couple of nice police officer and driven out to a nice dark place in the woods. You'll be put on your knees and there you'll see him standing over you. Just you, him and a nice deep, damp grave he dug just for you..."

The rage was back, and it was fuelled by an instinct she had long suppressed for self-preservation. She watched as Frank looked completely astounded by what she was saying. Like Sera had lost her mind. Perhaps she had; but for the first time in a long time she felt like her old self; before the drugs, before the post-partum depression which sent everything into a tailspin. She didn't raise her voice, her words were still just a whisper, but that whisper was enough to convey to Frank that she was not the woman he knew since before she got clean.

For in this moment at least, she was back.

"You'll beg and cry, swearing up and down that you'll leave town for good. But none of that will save you, because you presented yourself as a threat to the safety of the last person on this world he loves," she pressed on, twisting her words far crueler, and far more vicious than ever. "You'll get two rounds in the back of your head for that, then you'll get buried and you will be forgotten by everyone in a heartbeat... because that's what you are, Frank: forgettable trash, just like I am..."

She blinked and remaining leaned close to the startled man for only a moment longer. She came back to reality.

What she said had been mostly for show... mostly. James was not someone to mess with, but would he take Frank somewhere quiet and execute him? That was up for some debate, but Sera knew James, and James was frankly prepared to do anything to keep what he had left safe. He had said as much to her that he was willing to destroy her years prior. For her, however, the only thing that mattered was that Frank got the message, and by the looks of it. He got it loud and clear. He remained still and silent as he weighted the warning with great care.

Sera allowed the anger to erode from her face. She gave him a small smile instead. Perhaps it was time to take James up on extending the family counselling to her as well. She felt like she was bipolar or something. She was too old to collapse into a rage that made her daughter's look tame in comparison.

"But it doesn't have to be this way, Frank..." Sera broke the silence as she leaned back into her seat. "So this is your one warning: continue to sell to Chloe if you must, but Rachel is off fucking limits. Are we on the same page?"

Frustrated by how this turned out, Frank threw up his hands.

"Jesus Fuck, Gearhardt... yeah I get it... getting shot in the back of the head seems unlikely, but I'm not going to gamble on that..." he finally conceded to her.
Sera inspected Frank carefully to see if there was any sort of deception. She didn't see anything of the sort. Frank number one priority had always been self-preservation from all things law enforcement based. If something could burn him in that huge a way, he wasn't going to take the risk.

She would have to trust he would hold himself to the agreement. If not… well… James could always finish what she started.

"Thank you, Frank," she said, and genuinely meaning it too. "You're a decent enough guy, but for God's sake please find someone in your age range…"

With what she needed to get off her chest spoken, Sera smiled as she pushed herself out of the booth. Frank continued to stare at her, but it was… different this time. Frank coughed, catching Sera's attention.

"Hey, so… random thing to ask… but… when do you get off work?" Frank asked her, a small grin appearing on his face as he looked her over. "Honestly, it was kinda hot to see you get this worked up like this. I'm glad Damon was wrong about you, sobriety suits you…"

Sera blinked as her brain blanked out. She was not quite sure what to make of this new situation she had stumbled into.

"Flattering… but you're a dealer and I have an addictive personality; the Fates are not aligned for us," Sera spoke as straight as she could without laughing. "Besides, I don't date that young and neither should you."

Patting Frank's arm sympathetically, Sera left his to his cooling chilli and tried her best to make peace with the idea that Frank Bowers now wanted to sleep with her instead of her daughter. It was only confirmed when she glanced back and caught him looking at her.

As much as she might have disliked this, as much as she wished she could just bleach her brain, she supposed this was just one of those things a parent would do for their children. One of those parental sacrifices she heard so much about…

Parenting, Sera decided, was decidedly could be a pretty fucked up thing at times…

---

Chapter End Notes

I admit I wasn't a fan of last chapter. You see I wrote an almost completed Rachel and Chloe meet Kate Marsh chapter and then realized Kate arrives the same time Max does, which left me scrambling and settling on a half thought out Max scene and Lewd.

Oh well, it'll be something to look forward to!

Thanks for reading everyone!

Next Chapter: Victoria Chase and Chloe Price: Best Frenemies Forever
Wrapping herself tightly up in her bath towel, Rachel Amber stepped out of the dorm shower, her fingers unconsciously running along the jagged scar running along her wrist and forearm.

It was her imperfection, her permanent reminder of her failures. She hated and honoured the mark. It was the lasting reminder to the dangers of acting without thinking; and nearly every time she looked at it, Rachel silently vowed she would never do something as foolish as that for as long as she should live. Not when she knew the stakes.

She exhaled unsteadily as she recognized that she was in a melancholy mood right now. It was part of the grief process she learned from her occasional meetings with the Councillor she went to from time to time. It was to be expected to be like this around this time of year.

It was two days until the anniversary of her Mom's death and she was about to go see her Dad without Chloe. It might come to others as a surprise, but Rachel was capable of doing things without her. It was just that sometimes she just needed to have these private one on one's with her Dad, so that she could properly figure out where he was actually at in his grieving. With Chloe around, Dad always did his utmost to come off as nothing was wrong. It was sort of a Stepford Dad bullshit thing. He didn't want to look weak; he was sort of okay with that in front of his daughter, but definitely not in front of Chloe. It seemed as though the two of them were still in a phase where they felt they had to impress each other, which was annoying.

But what Dad never seemed to understand was that Chloe was not dumb; she was just polite (yes, Chloe was able to be polite) enough to let him play his games and hold up his public face. Chloe was just as aware what was going on as Rachel was. The art of suppressing though ignoring the pain was an old hat for Chloe. It was how she processed the loss of William, even to this day.

Perhaps it was just what happened when you had your heart so shredded apart.

Rachel didn't have the luxury of cool, simmering grief like Chloe and Dad had. If she didn't express it, it built up and she did *bad* things... mostly to herself. She had nearly failed school this year. None of it seemed to matter to her and worse yet she knew Mom would be furious that she was doing this to herself.

Chloe by comparison had flourished. She had gone from total schoolwork apathy to reaching a fucking 3.0 GPA in their last report period. After getting her second chance, she seemed to have really taken it to heart. Honestly Rachel was pretty proud of her for that, but she definitely was surprised to find out Chloe was a secret nerd. Well, maybe she was not *that* surprised. It was no secret that Chloe had a passion for academics; but between her grief for her father and image as a delinquent it could easily lost in sea that was Chloe Price.

Wrapping William's stopped wrist watch around her scarred wrist, gathering her clothing and throwing a second towel around her shoulders, Rachel left the bathroom breezing by Samantha.
Meyers with the briefest of smiles. The girl sort of blushed at the sight of Rachel. She averted her eyes from the older girl as though she had no business to be in her presence.

Samantha Meyers was a sweet girl but plain girl without a bad bone in her body. She didn't draw attention to herself and in turn no attention was drawn to her. Rachel liked her because she didn't play the drama game; she didn't engage in rumour mongering or draw conclusions. She was at school to learn, and Rachel really had to respect the drive she had. She wasn't bogged down by anything, or at least that was what she seemed on the surface.

But as she learned long ago, everyone wore a mask, Samantha included… it was just a matter of time before Rachel figured out her as well.

"Hello Samantha," Rachel greeted Samantha as a performance smile came to her face for the smaller teenager. "Hey, so did you hear that Chloe and I are throwing a party this weekend?"

Looking at Rachel suspiciously, Samantha scrunched up her button nose like she was uncomfortable with the question she had been asked.

"I did hear of it..." Samantha spoke slowly, uncertainly. "But I-I thought it was a Vortex Club party only..."

Rachel blinked as a small chill ran through her stomach. Why would Samantha or anyone for that matter be under the impression that was the case? It wasn't going to be some rich kid circle jerk. Both Chloe and she had made it a point to advertise that the party had no restrictions. Everyone got their chance to have an invite.

It didn't take long before Rachel had a couple theories of who was behind this disinformation campaign. At this point all she needed was a confirmation. She narrowed her eyes at Samantha and remained steadily silent as she watched the girl grow more nervous with every second she had the attention of the Queen of Blackwell's complete and undivided attention.

"Who said that?" Rachel flatly asked her.

Rachel watched as the girl's entire defense just crumble down in front of her. She didn't take joy in it, but she needed to get to the bottom of it and she had no time to ease an answer out of Samantha gracefully. She would find a way to apologize later.

"A couple of girls in my grade... Danica Sedgwick and Lauren Wilson were talking about it," Samantha informed her, clearly frightened by the staring older girl. "Courtney Wagner told them they weren't invited, that it was the Vortex Club and potential members only... I'm not really Vortex Club material..."

Courtney Wagner.

She was right at the top of her list.

In an effort to please Victoria, Courtney was proactive in enforcing whatever she assumed would be Victoria's policy on anything. She was a weak little follower who craved more power, but she would never be able to wield it. So she utilized what she got by picking on those lower down the social totem pole for the approval of Victoria and her betters; and for the most part Courtney would get her approval because Victoria was a bitch who liked to throw her weight around.

What Courtney didn't know was that Victoria and Rachel had come to an agreement at her Mother's funeral wake. Victoria would not interfere into the affairs of Rachel and Chloe, and Chloe and Rachel would not go to war against Victoria. So far both sides had honoured the agreement for
the most part; there was a lot of sniping, especially between Chloe and Victoria, but nothing blew out of hand.

So with that history in mind, Rachel took a small leap of faith in the case of Chase. Victoria knew that this party was Chloe and Rachel's; she knew that and would not attempt to alter the parameters. This was an act committed by someone outside the unofficial pact of Chloe, Victoria and Rachel. Taylor was snippy, but she was a sweetheart at her core, and so that left Courtney exposed.

Rachel stepped forward towards the younger girl, her fingers gripped Samantha's shoulders, making the smaller girl go rigid in some sort of weird hybrid of gay panic and social anxiety. Deciding to go easy on her, as she allowed a smile to return back to her face as Rachel leaned in.

"I'm going to let you in on a secret, Samantha: Fuck that bitch, Fuck the Vortex Club and fuck their stupid exclusionary games," she said firmly, watching as Samantha's face brightened. "Rachloefest is for anyone who can make it, Samantha. Chloe I would like for you to be there if you can."

Samantha blinked.

"Rachloefest?" Samantha inquired, looking both amused and confused.

Rachel emitted a small laugh, her fingers rubbing the back of her neck as she nodded at the awful name.

"Yeah… Chloe came up with it…” Rachel informed her lightly. "Could you go and speak to Danica and Lauren as well as any of your friends Courtney shut down and have them meet me for lunch tomorrow? Chloe and I would like to personally re-invite them to the party."

Samantha's mouth formed into a dazzling smile.

"I'll let them know," she said excitedly. "Thank you Rachel… You-you're really nice to us; and you don't have to be."

Samantha was sure as hell right about that one…

"You have nothing to thank me for, Samantha," Rachel dismissed as she stepped back from the other girl. "If you need a ride there, you let Chloe or I know and you'll be our plus one."

Exchanging goodbye waves with Samantha, Rachel in silence watched as Samantha retreated into the bathroom, leaving her alone to simmer in her rage. As soon as the door closed behind her, Rachel's hand formed into a fist as a surge of violence crossed into her thoughts.

It was looking as though she had a bitch to knock back down.

In dead silence she started walking, ignoring Alyssa Anderson and the next girl on her list, Stella Hill who talked behind her back and was clearly under the delusional impression Rachel wasn't paying attention to her. All this time and people still thought she wasn't taking notes… that somehow losing her mother meant that Rachel was somehow quicker to shrug off the rumours still being spread.

She would probably do the right thing with Stella though. She was young, and probably didn't know better. She would issue her a warning and figure out what the hell was her problem…

She'd probably have to ask Stella why she thought taking Speed was a good idea…

Yes, she was always watching everyone. They could have their lies and slander against her, but
Rachel found the truth far more interesting to command.

It wasn't long before Rachel was standing outside of Room 221. She could hear the sound of conversation on the other side. What she actually heard was Victoria talking and two girls agreeing with that ever she had to say.

Rachel raised her fist and knocked twice.

The room went silent and Rachel remained still as she heard footsteps approach the entrance. The door opened and standing there was Victoria Chase, her mouth clamped shut as she inspected the sight of Rachel in only a couple towels. She looked as though she had something caught in her throat.

"Rachel Amber..." Victoria spoke pleasantly enough as she found her ability to speak. "You're kind of underdressed..."

Rachel smiled as politely as she could for the obviously curious girl. Victoria had grown up as well; her cheek bones more defined, and easily a head taller. It seemed as though Chase was finally growing into her ice queen persona. She would be a real heart breaker soon enough.

"Hello Victoria, thank you for the interest..." she returned without any sort of care. "I'll make this quick. Is Courtney in there?"

Sure enough at the sound of her name, Rachel noticed Courtney step out of the shadow as too did Taylor, but Taylor wasn't her focus for today. Courtney was and right now she was attempting to look innocent, and in doing so more or less confirmed her guilt.

"Hi Courtney," Rachel greeted the other girl with a smile. "So basically if you show up at Chloe and my party, I'm going to kick your face in."

Victoria's eyes widened at the promise Rachel had made, as too did Courtney naturally. Having Rachel Amber threatening her openly was naturally a shock. Rachel didn't entirely mean it, but she was not going to back down now. Chloe and she were trying to have an event where no one was left out, and here was some bitch trying to alter its purpose to fit the agenda of someone who probably didn't okay it.

"Ah, what are you talking about, Rachel?" Courtney inquired, like she was Miss fucking Innocent.

Rachel stepped past Victoria and forced Courtney's back into the door. She hadn't touched the girl yet. All it took was the implication of danger for Courtney Wagner to do all the work for her. What the hell was Rachel going to do, fight in a towel?

It didn't matter. Courtney was a bully. She was a weak person, and weak people were easy to knock down with the right amount of pressure.

"You had no right to scare people off from my party," Rachel nearly snarled at the brunette. "The only reasons I'm not beating you down or calling Chloe out here to make this so much worse is out of respect to Victoria. I got enough shit on my plate without you adding to it."

Rachel was very aware she was making a scene right now, but she just did not care. There were a dozen girls out in the hallway silently watching in amazement as Rachel Amber had just torn into one of Victoria Chase's underlings and instead of defending one of her own, Victoria stood there just watching it unfold carefully. Victoria and Rachel were locked in a Cold War. It did not take much to start the war full on.
There was good reason why this hadn't escalated into a showdown right here, right now: Rachel had used the right amount of respect on Victoria. It was enough respect to acknowledge her place in this matter, but not enough to come off as condescending or like a kiss ass.

It was as her Mom once said when she was younger: 'It was easier to get what you wanted when you managed to win the obstacles over to your side.'

"Excuse me," Victoria snapped as she stepped back next to Rachel, her arms crossed over her chest. "What in the fuck is this about?"

Glaring at Courtney a moment longer, Rachel finally blinked and redirected her attention back to Victoria. She noticed there was no anger in Victoria's expression, just a resigned curiosity. She was resigned because Victoria knew full well that Rachel wouldn't make a scene like this unless one of her friends had seriously fucked up.

"Victoria, if I were you, I would be little tighter on the leash for this one," Rachel spoke, flattening her tone out to something a little more friendly. "She's under the impression that she speaks for you, and I am seriously hoping she is mistaken…"

Courtney tried to sputter out a defense, but was silenced by Victoria's sharp inhale and her hand being raised in the air. It collapsed any effort Courtney was about to make, because she knew the adults were talking now. Neither of them had the time for any of her shit.

"Shut… the fuck… up, you stupid bitch…" Victoria spoke to Courtney with nothing but malice in her words. She lowered her hand and added. "Rachel, she doesn't speak shit for me. Was she trying to co-opt your thing?"

Rachel didn't even have a chance to answer when Victoria drew her own conclusions.

"Never mind, of course she was," Victoria muttered to herself. Rachel could not help but notice that the anger in her tone wasn't put on.

Victoria shot Courtney a withering glare before she turned back to face Rachel, her arms crossing over her chest. She looked uncomfortable, which was expected when Victoria was about to admit she had not her hand over her people as strongly as she should have.

"Courtney still seemed to forget where she is in her social standing. That's the problem with poor girls flying too close to the sun…” Victoria spoke, to Rachel, her words biting and clearly directed towards Courtney as much as they were to Rachel. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I promise you, I'll deal with her."

Rachel remained motionless for a moment. As much as she wasn't a fan of Victoria's financial bullying, but she knew that was as good as she was going to get from her school frenemy. After another moment of silence between the two of them, Rachel finally nodded, accepting the word of Chase as genuine.

Rachel glanced around Victoria and directed her attention back to Courtney.

"I'm going to be issuing an apology and another invitation to the students you ostracized at lunch tomorrow, and if you know what is fucking good for you, you'll make an appearance as well," Rachel informed her sharply. "Mess things up for me again, and being Victoria's friend isn't going to save you."

"She'll be there grovelling before you even arrive…” Victoria assured her, earning a small smile from Rachel and a nod. She liked the sound of that.
With her business with Victoria complete, she started to head back to her room when she felt an arm reach out and lock with hers. It was Victoria, and she carefully led Rachel a few steps away from her door towards Rachel's dorm. Rachel glanced at the crowd now breaking up and noticed Samantha standing there, a little confused, but mostly very pleased.

Rachel allowed her a small smile and a wink before she followed Victoria down the hallways.

By the time the two of them reached halfway to 224, Victoria slowed down to a standstill and turned to properly face Rachel's weary eyes. She allowed a small smile to cross onto her face for the Amber girl.

"I know what time of year it is for you... Chloe as well..." Victoria spoke, her voice a little strained as she looked back to see if anyone was watching. "It may not seem like it, but I am thinking of you and your father."

Of all the things Rachel hypothesized Victoria was about to say, she had to admit she wasn't expecting that from her. It was... sort of a nice reminder to have of a Victoria Chase not many got to see. There was a vulnerable side underneath it all... something Rachel could be properly friends with if Victoria only let her try...

Victoria's expression of sympathy left her toying with the idea of inviting her along to a visit to mom on Wednesday, but two facts stopped it from being voiced.

First it was kind of random invite someone to see her Mom's grave, especially when Rachel was not close to her at all.

Second, Chloe would spend the entire time looking for an open grave to toss Victoria into.

It was one thing for Rachel and Victoria to make peace, it would be quite another thing to have Chloe and Victoria reconcile. That act would take a miracle not even she could make happen.

"Thank you, Victoria..." she finally said as the short haired blonde released her hand on Rachel's shoulder. "I'm... glad we could work through this..."

With a thin smile, Victoria nodded once and silently turned away; leaving Rachel to ponder what a proper friendship with Victoria Chase would be like.

An impossibility, but it was a curious idea to think on.

...

Closing her door behind her and dropping her towels in order to search for clothing, Rachel couldn't help but look over her Chloe Price.

Chloe was currently in the middle of a nap on Rachel's bed; because of course she was. That was just how she rolled. It was little wonder why Chloe didn't rush out the moment the moment Rachel started arguing a few feet away. When Chloe slept, she was out like a light.

Watching Chloe sleep was always sort of freaked Rachel out. Okay, it was one of the few things that definitely freaked out.

She never knew what she was going to get from watching it. More often than not she would be
peaceful as she was right now, but Chloe's nightmares were wild to witness. She would talk in her sleep. Mostly – Rachel assumed - was to her father, but it was nothing which Rachel could grasp. Other nights she would jerk around like she was having a seizure. She would wake up shaking and in a sweat, and no matter how often Rachel would ask, she would never get a straight answer. She would instead just lie back down and push herself closer to Rachel as though she was the end all solution.

Well, if that was how Chloe felt, Rachel would do her utmost to be that for her. For now she was just gratefully Chloe was having a good, extra comfortable sleep, laying on her chest and snoring lightly.

As comfy as Chloe looked, Rachel managed to battle off all the instincts telling her to forget getting dressed and instead snuggle in bed with her.

She still had places to be, Dads to check up on. So with that in mind, she managed to convince herself to get dressed, throwing on a mixture of her clothing and Chloe's (thankfully clean) combat jacket. As soon as she was properly dressed for an outing, Rachel collapsed onto the bed next to Chloe and nipped her neck.

It was enough to stir a groggy reaction out of her girl.

Moaning gently, Chloe reach up and cupped Rachel's head so that she remained locked on Chloe's flesh. Rachel looked down and noticed Chloe's bare toes curl.

So… she was in that sort of mood… This was an interesting turn of events. She would not deny that her argument had left her a little flustered and in need of an outlet. It was something to keep in mind later though. It was something to look forward to when she got home…

"Price, where are your keys?" Rachel breathed into her as she pulled her mouth away from Chloe's neck. "I gotta borrow the truck for the evening."

Groaning, Chloe rubbed her eyes and rolled over onto her back and quietly inspected Rachel, a small smile forming on lips.

"Hot date tonight, Amber?" she teased Rachel.

Rachel could not help but smirk, her fingers reaching out to pat her girlfriend's cheek.

"Yup," she played along, her eyes hooded as she grazed her finger tips along Chloe's cheek until they reached her lips. "I figured it was about time to find some side girl; but don't worry. If I like her, I'll bring her home for the two of us…"

Rachel felt herself get hit by the pillow Chloe had suddenly pulled out from under her head and causally threw at her. She rolled back onto her stomach. Amused by her heated reaction, Rachel pushed herself a little closer, her fingers reaching out to glide along the back side of Chloe's leg.

"I'm going to visit my Dad," she informed her. "I figure I'd check in on him as much as I can in the next few weeks. Talking to Sera the other day got me thinking… and I've been sort of avoiding him."

Rachel watched as Chloe pulled herself up from her comfortable position. She placed herself against her, her arm reaching out and wrapping around the smaller girl's waist. Chloe remained silent, giving Rachel time to focus on her steadily increasing guilt over her relationship with her Dad, which felt like it was in a nose dive these days.
She wished it wasn't this way, but she couldn't help it that everything about her Dad reminded her about her Mom, and every single reminder of her found a way to hurt her even more. She hated that she felt this way, because her Dad deserved so better than that sort of avoidance from her. But the pain of losing Mom hadn't mellowed out; it only grew more pronounced, more potent and difficult to manage, and she hated how far seemed to be from a recovery.

"Yeah… I know that," Chloe agreed softly, gripping Rachel a little tighter against her. "It was… hard to face my Mom, even after I met you… and now… I hate that my Mom felt obliged to marry that… shithead. Worst part is she still holds onto a belief that I want to be his stepdaughter; I don't need him… I don't want him. I have a Dad… and James is really cool to me… considering I'm smashing his only daughter and all…"

In spite of every miserable thought she had roaming through her head; Rachel could not stop herself chuckling softly as she rolled her eyes at the last part of her statement. It almost made her miss the bitterness Chloe was obviously still feeling with the fact that her mother was now a Madsen.

"God, if you're talking to my Dad about that, I'm so not going to be impressed…" Rachel tried to lighten the mood.

Rachel trailed off for a moment.

"Why don't you check up on your Mom, Chloe?" she suggested, hoping it didn't spark anything. "You can drop me off at Dad's and go see her. You'll have the truck so you can leave anytime you start feeling uncomfortable."

Chloe shrugged and examined Rachel closely. She had things on her mind but knew better then to act on them.

"I don't go because David is there… because Joyce thinks me leaving town is some great fucking betrayal…" she confessed as she averted her eyes in order to look out the window. "Mostly because I don't know what to say to either of them anymore; I haven't known what to say for nearly two years now. It's all fucked up right now, and I don't see how or why this… fake fucking family unit should be allowed to exist…"

Rachel remained silent as she considered Chloe's opinion on the state of her own family. Although Rachel and Joyce were one decent enough terms, there was not even an attempt at a connection to David Madsen. Rachel treated him as though the man did not exist beyond name only. He might have been innocent in the eyes of the law, but he had destroyed her life through carelessness. As angry as she was with David Madsen… as much as she hated the man to the point where she had to pretend the man didn't exist, looking at Chloe now and seeing the obvious pain she was in from missing her mother was enough to make her push the hate and resentment aside. If she could do anything to ease the quiet agony Chloe was silently submitting her to in order to spare Rachel during her own grief, then it was the least she could do. They were partners in everything after all.

"We'll figure out a way make it right together… I never… wanted you to feel like your mother is an enemy, Chloe…" Rachel promised her, interlocking her fingers into Chloe's. "We'll figure this out. After everything you've done… God, I owe you that much…"

Chloe looked at her, her expression was strange. She seemed to be genuinely at a loss of words; which was a real rarity for Chloe Price. Rachel felt Chloe tighten her grasp.

"You don't owe me anything, Rachel. You never did…" Chloe assured her with a serenity Rachel
rarely heard echoed out of her girlfriend. She watched Chloe's lips quirking upwards.

Rachel leaned in towards her girl, her fingers running through Chloe's hair as pulled her into a gentle, passionate kiss. She loved the little gasp Chloe emitted, the way she sort of melted into it, trusting Rachel with just enough control over her body. She loved the way Chloe's long fingers gripped the front of Rachel's shirt keeping her close.

Rachel pulled her mouth away from Chloe's and smiled.

Most of all, she just loved Chloe Price…

"Keep talking like that and you'll make it harder for me to leave..." Rachel murmured her nose touching Chloe's. "...I'd take you along-

She didn't have to finish her wish. Rachel trailed off as she felt a finger touch against her lips. Chloe shook her head with a half-smile and produced the keys to their truck. She placed them into the palm of Rachel's hands and folded her fingers over them for her.

"He needs to see his daughter, Rach; and you need to see your dad," Chloe reassured her girlfriend. "It's...probably better it happens without this one girl sexy distraction keeping you flustered..."

As Chloe gestured to herself with both of her thumbs, Rachel couldn't help but laugh a little and Chloe joined. Rachel rest rested her head on Chloe's shoulder, wiggling a little closer.

"Understatedly sexy..." she whispered into Chloe's ear, her fingernails pushing into Chloe's neck, causing a visible shiver in her girlfriend. Reluctantly, she pulled back from Chloe, allowing one added kiss on the end of Chloe's nose before she stood up and stretched out.

"I should be back before 9," she informed Chloe as she placed her thumbs into her jean pockets.
"I'm probably going to need a hella cuddle session, so pick out a movie... and make it something that you won't fall asleep through, though...I know it might be asking a bit much, but we should try..."

Rachel grinned as she watched Chloe pump her fist theatrically.

"Pornhub, here we come!" Chloe announced excitedly.

Whether or not Chloe had meant that innuendo, Rachel wasn't entirely sure. Usually Chloe was pretty proud when she did something clever. She time Chloe was just plain excited. Whatever the case was, all she could do was roll her eyes at Price.

"I said a movie you don't fall asleep during. Not one where you rub one out and fall asleep fifteen minutes after..." she replied, sarcasm dripping from her words as she reached out on grazed her cheek.

Rachel watched Chloe chomp down on her bottom lip. It didn't take much to get her ready... All it took were the right words to get her there.

"I don't do that... often..." she murmured, a little flustered by the observation.

Chuckling slightly, Rachel leaned in once more time and placed her lips over Chloe's for a fleeting moment. She wanted more. Every instinct had demanded more...

It was an instinct she would have to deny … at least for a few more hours…
"How about you rub one out now and have another nap. When I get back, we'll see where tonight leads to…” Rachel suggested coyly as she pulled back. "I will see you tonight, Chlo…”

"You are literally the best fucking girlfriend ever, you know that right?!" Chloe informed her excitedly as Rachel made her exit. "I'm not even going to use the internet. It'll just be you on my mind!"

Rachel smiled and allowed Chloe to watch her hips roll as she strolled out of their room.

She didn't need Chloe's confirmation. That was just an irrefutable fact.

Chapter End Notes

I was pretty exhausted when I finished this. Woke up and cleaned it. I know that I promised Chloe and Victoria. I had a couple false starts on the first day which put me behind schedule. I decided to split this chapter in two. That encounter is next.

Thank you for reading and your continued support.

Next Chapter: Chloe and Victoria (for real this time)
After the incident between Rachel Amber and Courtney, Victoria Chase couldn't figure the Blackwell Queens out at all.

It was not for a lack of trying. She got the picture in general, but the end game was something which only they knew. Rachel Amber and Chloe Price operated on an entirely separate plane altogether. Together the two of them glided their way through the social hierarchy in both directions seamlessly.

It wasn't hard to figure out why the two most sought after candidates for the Vortex Club were throwing this party which had the entire Academy whispering for the past few weeks. They were consolidating the outcasts under their control in an attempt to maintain their undisputed positions at top of the food chain. It was… a clever move to make and it told her just how seriously Rachel and Chloe were taking the invitations to the Club.

They just didn't give a solitary fuck it at all. All they were doing was stringing the Club along.

And why should they give a shit when they had the entire school population already eating out of their hands? They had the underclasses as a base and the senior grades entranced. Ultimately the two of them had transcended the need for belonging because for them, they were each other's worlds. Everything else was just white noise, little annoyances that stood between them and their lives together, and would blame them. Chloe Price's boyfriend, or whatever the fuck he was murdered Rachel's mother and proved how fucking shit everyone was to them.

But still, Victoria had prided herself as an observer. She was not without a few breakthroughs. On outward appearance, it seemed as though Rachel was the one in charge. Like she was guiding Chloe Price through her world and Chloe was just sort of along for the ride. This was what the world saw, and understandably so. Rachel Amber was a beautiful girl, and the world reacted more to that then the rougher vibrancy Price had.

But between the two of them, it was a whole separate matter. Whenever the two of them were alone and seemingly away from others, their demeanour shifted to something far more serious and it seemed as though Price was the one doing all the talking. Like, she was some sort of guiding force to Amber. Sometimes it seemed as though Rachel was… almost paralyzed without Price there. Victoria chalked this up to Rachel losing a mother and Price having already gone through this sort of loss.

If rumours were to be believed, they'd be on the road by the start of summer, doing God knows what. Probably some sort of super gay adventure. Victoria could not think of anything more lesbianish than two gay girls on the road driving around in that old ass truck they were so fucking proud about. Dana Ward and Juliet Watson were both convinced that the two of them would be heading north… Washington or Canada and obtain a marriage licence in the summer. They were taking bets on who would take whose name.

Dana and Juliet - Victoria determined - were in need of some hobbies.
Then again Victoria wasn't much better than those two ditzy bitches were. Here she was thinking about Rachel and Chloe and watching as Chloe Price charmed the school burn outs with her skateboarding abilities. It was just as she thought. Rachel and Chloe were consolidating the various communities and junior grades against the Vortex Club, with Rachel more or less dividing the Club with her own charm campaign from within. It was fucking devious and it impressed the hell out of her. At least… that's what she saw.

Fuck… why was she even thinking about any of this still? Why and when in the fuck did everything suddenly start revolving around those two? She had her own fucking problems. She had fucking Courtney getting out of control, to a point where she needed to retrain her or risk open conflict with Rachel and Nathan was getting more and more despondent to everything. She knew he was using meds, and they sure as fuck weren't prescribed to him.

With Nathan on her mind, Rachel and Chloe on her back and a cigarette between her lips, Victoria scrolling her phone as casually as she could as she realized that Chloe Price had seemed to have gotten into an argument with the security guard Skip… whoever. She had broken off from the Skateboarders and was heading in her direction, like Victoria, she too had her phone in her hand.

At first she figured she was texting her girlfriend, but there was an expression on her face that told her she was not in conversation with probably one of the only people who could make the sullen punk girl smile. Instead Price stopped walking and sort of shifted foot to foot. She looked… hurt as she texted. Victoria could hear the keystrokes from where she sat and much more curious was the utterance of 'fuck you, David' she muttered.

Victoria furrowed her brow at the name she heard. Was Chloe seeing someone on the side? No… That was pretty unlikely considering how much a mega lesbo Chloe was. She was a one woman Saemangeum Seawall… World's Largest Dyke… God, why the fuck was she such a nerd… she needed to stop spending so much time on Wikipedia.

While she was probably not in a relationship with the man, whoever this David was, Price was furious at him. Whatever was happening, David was probably lucky as fuck he wasn't within fifty feet of her.

Price looked up and found Victoria had been observing her. It was obvious that the last thing she wanted right now was to deal with Victoria, but with Victoria sitting on the trail to the quickest route to the Dorms, it was an inevitable confrontation. She watched as Price kicked up her skateboard, her free hand pushing back her beanie and revealing more of her grudgingly attractive blue locks.

As the punk girl approached, Victoria took a drag of her cigarette and put her phone away into her purse. She looked up to the Queen's consort and offered the tall girl a faint smile which did not reach her eyes. Try as she might, Victoria did not like Price. They had nothing in common.

"Chloe Price. It's so nice to see you, and not be able to smell you from here!" Victoria greeted before clamping her mouth shut. She hadn't meant to go from 0 to 100 that fast.

Price looked at her. She was more amused than she was angry. If this as several years ago, the anger would be fast, but Rachel Amber's personality had rubbed off onto her. The bitch just fucking smiled exactly like Rachel would have. Like Victoria was just a fucking tick or a leech to burn off.

Victoria inwardly glowered, she fucking hated feeling like she was out of her depths, especially when it was fucking poor white trash getting pitied fucked by a virtual goddess who could probably edge her out without trying very hard. Not when Price had her natural spine, and two years of learning Rachel's linguistic ability to fucking destroy others with only a few words spoken
at the exact right moment.

That was probably what scared her most… that Chloe Price had the potential to be so, so much more dangerous than Rachel.

"Vicky… It's always a pleasure when you decide to call me by my first name instead some charming variation of bitch..." Price returned as she stepped forward towards Victoria. "Where are your minions tonight? Finding you an unspoiled virgin to bathe in their blood?"

Victoria bit back the urge to say something that would only escalate it. That was when she noticed just how prepared Price looked, as if she purposefully attempting to draw Victoria out into an argument. No, she was not going to be lured by this walking trash human being.

Permitting a false smile to curve her lips Victoria just shrugged.

"Taylor is out doing whatever she does and Courtney is preparing for tomorrow's apology as your girl demanded," was her only response. It was refrained and casual. There was nothing which Price would be able to use against her.

Still though, Price raised her brow at the reference to Rachel which it appeared she wasn't privy to. Victoria allowed her smile to reform into a smirk at the sight of the older girl looking confused that she was completely out of the loop here.

"Oh, your girlfriend didn't tell you?" Victoria asked, her voice growing to simpering mocking. "Courtney was trying to hijack your party for Vortex Club. Rachel came to my room a few hours ago and was about to call you out to kick Courtney's ass… but I guess that everyone has their secrets they keep. She didn't want to trust you with that, so who am I to judge?"

She knew she said the right thing to inspire Price into fury. She just wasn't entirely sure she was happy to do that.

"You know, it's not too late for that ass kicking..." Price hissed, her arms crossing over her chest. "You fucking people, you just have to shit on everything you don't control, don't you?"

Flicking her cigarette onto the concrete, Victoria stood up and pushed herself right into Price's personal space.

"I'm just pushing your buttons, so settle the fuck down, you gangly bitch!" she snapped right back at Chloe, giving her a hard shove. "I had your girlfriend's back, but I think I'm starting to regret this fucking arrangement!"

Price looked ready to knock her out. Her hand had been pulled into a fist; but before that could go down, Trevor Yard blew by the two of them, Justin Williams in hot pursuit.

"Cat fight, Cat fight!" Trevor called as he passed by the girls. "Yo Justin, Chloe's gonna smash that gash!"

Victoria slapped her hand on her face. Guys were fucking disgusting.

"I'm telling Rachel, Prrriceey!" Justin added just as gleeful. "Wait 'till she finds out her Beth is trading her in for a younger mode-"

As Justin tried to get around Chloe and Victoria, Chloe rounded back and kicked the skateboard out from under Justin, sending the teen tumbling into the grass with a yelp. In spite of her antipathy for Chloe Price, she did have to laugh at the burn out dweeb she had harmed.
Rolling her eyes at Victoria, Chloe walked over to where Justin was sprawled out. She bent over and offered her hand to the skater. To her credit, Price didn't take any pleasure from it.

"Weak sauce, Price!" Justin said as he looked up at Price now looming high above him.

Price latched onto his hand and pulled the skater back up to his feet in one solid yank. There was a small grin on her face which Victoria refused to acknowledge the fact she thought it was charming… sort of.

"The fuck did I tell you about using Rach's nicknames?" Price warned, slapping him on the back and grabbing his skateboard before handing it over.

Victoria expected a fight. Instead Justin Williams laughed and together the two of them bro-ed out with a fist bump. She watched, slightly stunned as Justin limped away towards the waiting Trevor who was in the process of laughing at Justin as well. There was no malice in any three parties, there was no anger or even acknowledgement that Price had knocked the hell out of Justin and humiliated him in front of one of the most popular girls in school.

How in the hell was that possible?

Victoria shook off the shock quickly and turned to find Chloe's back was turned to her. She had dropped her skateboard and was reading another text, her free hand rubbing her neck. That expression of anger and disappointment had returned to her.

"So… Beth…" she spoke, her words softening. "How are you both doing? I mean, I imagine maintaining a relationship hard work, and considering you're the only openly gay couple in Blackwell, it's gotta be extra hard.

Emitting a groan, Price pocketed her phone and turned back.

"This was your one warning, Icky Vicky..." she informed her scathing and close to snapping. "What are you even doing? Asking for dirt, or are you thinking about a serious life change?"

A cold chill ran through Victoria. It was a feeling that she wasn't allowed to have.

"I'm not… like you…" she quietly refuted. She tried to ignore Price's face contorting into a smirk. There was no way she was buying it.

"Yeah…" Price retorted right back, her sarcasm thick. "You keep telling yourself that, you charmless Ellen DeGeneres knock off."

Again Price rolled her eyes.

"Whatever, are you coming to the Rachloefest next weekend or not?" she asked, leaving Victoria grateful for the conversation shift. "I'd like to know so that I'm prepared enough to be polite. Rachel is convinced you being a bitch is not who you actually are, but I'm a little more willing to believe you."

Victoria could not stop the audible ‘ugh’ noise from escaping her lips. She stepped forward and stood only inches away from the suspicious Price girl. There was no way to intimidate Price, even if she tried. Not after the Eliot Hampden incident. All Victoria could do was show the bitch that she was not scared of her.

"I haven't done anything to her in a long time," Victoria reminded Price, her teeth gritted as she glared at her. "We all agreed to peace after what happened to Rose, and I have abided it. I don't
see why you think I am still fucking with her like before."

None of that mattered to Price. Not the truce, not the promise Victoria made and kept to Rachel in the midst of her grief. It didn't matter because Chloe Price never trusted her to begin with. She stood there, looking at Victoria as though she had lost her mind. She stepped back, a confused looking grin crossing onto mouth as shook her head.

"No, you're doing something worse. You're not letting her know what you stand for," Price snapped back even harder. "At least when you were openly hostile, she knew how to treat you. Now you're going around, not as a friend and not as an enemy and she has no idea where you are at, and it keeps her on the fucking edge. Wagner may not have gotten the order from you, but you sure as fuck set the scene for that to happen."

"Fine, I'm suspicious of her! Happy?" Victoria interjected, unable to refrain herself. "I'm suspicious because I don't what she is, and I'm an excellent fucking judge of character. I know that's she's popular and loved, and it's not normal how she's capable of being this natural at it. I can't be her friend because I can't figure her out and it scares the hell out of me! I'm trying to give her the benefit of the doubt, but she does nothing to prove me wrong!"

The truth was now on the table for Chloe Price to digest. Victoria wasn't being mean or cruel, she was voicing an opinion -an uncomfortable one apparently – but an opinion nonetheless gathered from literal years of watching the way Amber operated. She was holding back on her more biting thoughts out of respect to her situation, but she the jest of her views were being aired now.

Price stood there, stupefied by what Victoria had said. It took a moment before she gathered herself enough to take a step back her hand pushing off her beanie as she shook her head incredulously. Like she refused to believe what Victoria was observing. Chloe was not objective. Victoria knew that none of what she said would be weighed and judged accurately. It was stupid to have even tried.

"I am so tired by this stupid fucking idea that Rachel is somehow fucking puppet master of this school. That she just sort of glides on in here, lures everyone into her orbit and keeps them as her little soldiers..." Price spoke, her voice growing louder and louder. "...Rachel, believe it or not, is a 17 year old girl who watched her Mom get murdered right in front of her. Rose was killed by a piece of shit who believed that exact same fucking shit you subscribe ‘s not untouchable; she's fucking scared of everyone here. It's not a game she's playing with you for control of the school or for popularity; it's a survival mechanism, you fucking self-absorbed, narcissistic…CUNT!"

The silence left at the collapse of Chloe Price's rage was somehow both deafening and devastating. Price looked like she was ready to have a fit, and Victoria had to force the self-loathing back down inside her as Price systematically alluded to her as being no better than the murdering piece of shit who killed Rose Amber. The same murdering piece of shit who tried to use this exact same line of logic to convince Chloe that she was in need of his protection...

To say she fucked up was an understatement. What a shit show… she needed a drink or something and forget this had happened.

"I… really shouldn't be talking about her behind her back…" Price finally muttered, a rueful smile touching on her lips. "It's just… it's just that you're such a fucking bitch all the time... I feel like you need a kick in the head… but Rachel won't let me do it, fuck knows why."

Victoria did not reply to Chloe's confessions for violence, or the fact that the only thing stopping her was the apparent command issued by her girlfriend. All of this didn't change anything, it just… couldn't. She was Victoria Chase and they were Rachel Amber and Chloe Price; the best any
of them could do was tolerance. Rachel's insane concept of friend was just that... an insane pipedream. Victoria knew that, and so too did Price.

So why was Price still supporting Rachel's illusions if she knew how hopeless it was? Was that what a relationship was? Supporting the delusions of your partner? Was that what love was to be? That was flat out madness.

"What do want out of me?" Victoria finally asked the glaring older teen. "I'm tolerating her; I can even be nice... but... I can't just be friends with her... It's not that simple."

Price groaned as she leaned down to grab her skateboard from off the pavement. She looked like she wanted nothing better than to end this conversation, which was fine by Victoria.

I don't give a fuck, anymore, but for the record. It's not that hard," Price spoke up as she turned back to Victoria. "If you want to be a friend to Rachel, then be a fucking friend. It's that fucking easy. If you don't, then have the guts to tell her so she at least knows to stop trying... but what would I know, just dumb trash compared to the two of you."

Closing her eyes as Victoria pondered the expression of where Chloe Price's actual self-esteem was, Price rubbed the bridge of her nose as she murmured 'I can't believe this bullshit...' under her breath.

"Okay... I'm... going to try to be nice to you..." Price spoke out loud, now directing her words to Victoria again. "For Rachel's sake, I'm going to invite you to our room for a serious smoke session and binge watch Kitchen Nightmares... maybe that will help ease this feeling I need to punch you in the throat... you coming or not?"

Victoria blinked at the invitation for a smoke session with Chloe Price inside the Amber and Price love nest. Not a lot of people were invited into the place where the Blackwell Queens bunked. Now here Chloe Price was offering to get her high... it was not a bad way to patch things up.

"Can I contribute?" Victoria volunteered, feeling a certain obligation not to be cheap. "I got an unopened bottle of Kahlua if you're game."

It took a moment to process this, but Victoria watch as for the first time a genuine smile crossed onto Chloe Price's face. Gesturing to Victoria to follow her, she started off in the direction of the dorms. Victoria only two paces behind her.

"Yeah bring that... and bring munchies as well..." she requested, earning a nod from Victoria. She paused and a small amount of hesitation dripping from her words, she added. "Forewarning I stuffed the weed down my pants after a smash session with the girlfriend. It's gonna taste like... stale me. Don't fucking judge free weed, 'kay?"

Victoria scrunched her nose up as she followed after Chloe Price and her confession. She really didn't need to know that...

Chapter End Notes

For its length it took a long time to get out. With Victoria a significant point of view
character, it's a matter of mixing both the canon personality with the significant changes in the wake of what happened.

Thank you for reading!

Next Chapter: good old fashioned Rachel and Chloe.
With another melancholy journey home under her belt, Rachel tiredly made her way up the front steps dormitory.

Rachel didn't like the solo trips home. With Chloe there, the ghosts of her mother seemed to be further away. She had a hand to hold, a body to hug or kiss. It lessened the thoughts that ran through her mind as she walked through the home which her mother had so violently died in. Jesus, it took until 6 months ago before she was even comfortable walking through the front door alone. Before that, she always opted using the back door instead… it always seemed wrong to walk on the spot where she died.

With this ghost haunting father and daughter, the best thing about Chloe or even Sera coming with her on these visits meant it forced her Dad to be social. He would talk and interact, even smile on occasion; but she always knew it was a show because of these solo trips. When they were alone, he'd barely utter a word to her. Like, the idea of speaking to her would somehow invoke the ghost of Rose Amber and bring up all the pain he had spent so long trying to suppressing order to function.

Probably the absolute shittiest thing about this whole affair was that in spite of the loss they shared, in spite of years of him being clean and up front with her, Rachel was still mad at him. That by itself drove the guilt in her to even lower places. What gave her the right to still resent him even after all this? Both Sera and she were capable of maintaining a relatively normal relationship and she spent much of Rachel's life strung out, but she was mad still at him for not telling the truth.

It just seemed to her that feeling like that for him was so unbelievably fucking wrong; but no matter what her brain told her, her heart demanded to hold onto his betrayal even closer.

The closest thing to an answer to this insanity had come from Chloe. She figured that the total failure of Sera as a mother amounted to nothing because Rachel hadn't didn't know Sera at all, because for her entire life she had a mother who loved her in Sera's place. Dad, at the end of the day, meant more to Rachel than Sera ever did up until that point. Losing that idealism and idolization of a father who was there was what made the lie feel so much worse.

Smart cookie that girl of hers; Rachel appreciated her opinion probably more than Chloe would ever be able to understand.

"She's in the rest room, and her restaurant is in the shitter… skulking precious princess…"

In spite of everything she had to deal with this evening, Rachel had to smile privately. The sound of Gordon Ramsey screaming at people from behind her dorm room door had meant that Chloe was stoned, and a stoned Chloe was always good for a laugh. That was something she really kinda needed at the moment, a little lightness to shake off the miserable feeling bubbling in the pit of her stomach.

Well… what she really needed her Blue Goddess for was a cuddle session first and foremost, and she wouldn't say no to some good oral, but laughter was definitely in the top three things she
needed to just forget.

But as she opened the door to their dorm room, Rachel was greeted to a sight she never thought she
would ever witness. It took a moment to even begin to process it.

There, sitting on Rachel's bed with her back against the wall was Chloe and curled up next to her
was Victoria Chase, her head resting on Chloe's lap.

Chloe seemed at a loss of words. So too was Rachel. The two girlfriends just sort of stared at each
other for a moment; both of them trying to figure out what was on each other's minds before they
voiced anything. It was obvious nothing happened, because if something had happened the room
would have reeked with hate sex.

Sort of amused, Rachel placed a hand on her hip. She decided she would be cool about this.
Besides, it gave her a little extra dirt on her quasi-rival.

"Made a new friend, I see…" Rachel was the first speak as smooth as she could manage.

She watched as Chloe lowered her eyes to look at the passed out rich girl using her as a head rest.

"Yeah… smoked the peace pipe and had a few drinks," Chloe told her plainly, devoid of feeling to
show off her indifference. "We made peace, at least for this week…You know me, anything for
my girl."

Rachel remained silent as the words Chloe spoke warmed her up more than she had expected. It
was always nice that Chloe was attempting to take a step towards a permanent peace.

Standing there in silence for only moment or two longer, Rachel retrieved her phone and silently
took a picture of Victoria passed out in the lap of her most mortal of enemies. There was nothing
quite as usual as having physical evidence of affection from an ice queen to lord over. Especially
when it was with the one person she fought the most against.

Pocketing her phone with a small grin, Rachel climbed onto the bed next to her stoned and drunk
angel and pushed her head into Chloe's shoulder. Idly she debated kicking Victoria out here and
now, but she had no desire to kill the quiet mood so soon. Plus it was kind of nice to see Chase be
this vulnerable. She was starting to wonder if vulnerability from Victoria ever existed at all.

"How's… James doing?" she heard Chloe murmured as her arm wrapped around Rachel's waist.

Rachel exhaled and grabbed the remote next to Chloe, turning the volume down on the monitor.
Chloe already knew the answer, but still she felt she needed to ask.

"You know him, drowning in his work…" Rachel sighed as she ran her fingers along the Chloe's
forearm. "I spent three hours making one sided conversation… ended up having to clean out his
fridge… I doubt he's made himself anything to eat beyond coffee and basics in a while. It's not that
he doesn't know how to cook, Mom taught him… he just doesn't do it…"

Chloe winced.

"Lots of take-out, I guess?" Chloe guessed out loud, her voice clearly worried as she was looking
for ways to erase Rachel's conscious. She couldn't, but it was nice of her to try.

Rachel closed her eyes.

"God, if only… no… my Dad just doesn't eat regularly period…" Rachel replied right away airily
as though it was no big deal. "I remember he had that dad belly starting… but I swear he's lost minimum 30 pounds… God, what a shit show…"

Rachel trailed off as she pushed herself closer to Chloe. Silently she folded her fingers into hers.

"I didn't… really think it was that bad," she whispered to her, her eyes falling to Victoria. "Usually I'd be meeting him at work or at the cemetery… I'm probably going to have to call Sera up and expand on that favour and… and… what are you doing… are you… are you petting Victoria's head?"

Chloe rounded back guiltily. Sure enough there she was running her hand through Victoria's platinum blonde hair as though the girl had become some sort of pet or something to amuse her. Chloe, as Rachel had to remember, was too drunk and stoned off her ass to hold much of a serious conversation.

"Yeah, she's sort of like a feral cat you calm down just long enough for her to be cool with petting," Chloe remarked after a moment, her words slightly slurred. "It won't last long, but you don't forget the moment… you should try it…"

Frowning, Rachel hesitated for a moment before temptation broke her willpower. She reached over and pushed her hand into Victoria's unnaturally soft mop of short blonde hair, making Chase stir and mumble in her sleep. Chloe was right, there something soothing about it in a taming a wild animal sort of way.

The two of them remained silent, occasionally catching each other's attention and smiling. Chloe passed over a pit bottle of Kahlua, which was just over two-thirds empty. Not one to pass up washing way her own issues, she took a drink and silently observed her girlfriend. She took in the sight of Chloe, her head was lowered, and she was no longer smiling anymore.

It was very easy to get ensnared into her problems, and not come up and see that others who mattered had their own issues they battled. It was especially easy for that to occur when Chloe had made it a point to hand hold Rachel every step of the way through her grief. She rarely tried to draw attention to herself. It was easy to forget that Chloe needed a hand too.

Setting the bottle down in her lap, Rachel reached out and pressed her index against Chloe's chin. She pushed Chloe's head until she was once again looking into her gentle, sad blue eyes. Gently she moved her fingers up, pushing into the small crease in Chloe's furrowed brow, running up and down as soothing as she could be.

"What's the matter, Chloe?" Rachel broke their silence between the two of them. "Are you okay?"

Chloe remained locked in silence. She averted her eyes from Rachel's, as though she were too ashamed to speak up and tell that there was something bothering her. After all this time, somewhere deep inside Chloe she didn't seem to think that what bothered her were inconsequential in comparison, when nothing could be further from the truth. That she was still somehow lesser than Rachel…

Keeping the flash of anger from being shown, Rachel continued to push her fingers in slow circles along Chloe's temple. Rachel knew that she didn't have to utter a single word. Chloe knew from heart what her love would demand from her. Chloe exhaled and pushed her head forward to against touch Rachel's.

Victoria mumbled and rolled over; her face was now resting flat in Chloe's crotch.
The girlfriends looked at each other with small smirks and so with the two of them in silent agreement Rachel grabbed her phone and took another picture.

"Skip isn't coming back next year... *Pisshead* just got signed," Chloe informed her, a note of amusement streaking her words as Rachel tossed her phone on the other side of the bed. "*Deputy Dipshit* just put in his resume for the position... and apparently been going to the main offices every day this past week."

Rachel felt her heart lurch at the mention of David Madsen and the idea of that asshole wandering around campus, bringing his overcompensation problems to the students of Blackwell.

But all of this went beyond simple animosity. The simple fact was that Joyce was not a wealthy woman, and a second stable income was inevitably going to be needed. If David Madsen was good at security, then it only seemed right for him to make the applications. It was the right move to make for his wife... even if Chloe had found a way to resent him even more than she already had.

Rachel left her one lingering question unspoken: *Why would Wells hire someone who was involved in the murder of Rose Amber?* Considering he misplaced a gun and didn't know that a teenager was breaking into his home for a month, the idea that he would get on at Blackwell seemed like a genuine impossibility without some serious references.

"What do you want to do?" Rachel asked her girlfriend carefully, not wanting to provoke her.

Chloe shrugged her shoulders.

"I have a few ideas..." was her very vague reply to the question. "It's...nothing I want to say in front of *Icky Vicky*, just in case..."

Smirking as she decided to take away her girl's one legitimate excuse not to answer her, Rachel brushed her lips against Chloe's before she leaned down and nearly pressed her lips against Victoria's ear.

"*Victoria?*" she gently breathed, allowing a solo sultry note permeating through her words. "*Victoria, sweet poison, it's time to wake up...*"

Victoria's eyes flew open and she retracted her head as soon as she realized someone had invaded her personal space, which had undoubtedly violated Chloe's personal space. Red faced, Victoria looked from Chloe to the girlfriend whom had had been inadvertently violating. It did not take long for her understand that her two school rivals had her in a very vulnerable position.

"*Rachel...*" was all that she could get out; but it was enough to make Rachel widen her smirk into a full blown smile. Rachel reached out, extending her hand to cup the still stoned Victoria's cheek.

"Hi," Rachel greeted her as though nothing out of the ordinary was happening. "How was your nap?"

Victoria did not reply. As she struggled to get up, she found out the hard way that Chloe was too quick. As Victoria removed her head off of Chloe, Chloe wrapped an arm around Victoria and brought her down resting into Chloe's bicep, leaving Victoria frozen.

With the game now agreed upon by the girlfriends, Rachel pursed her lips together to give the impression she was mad.

It was enough to make poor Victoria widen her eyes.
"I know she's wonderful and unusually comfy, but could you maybe give me my girlfriend back?" Rachel asked, dropping her tone to a low dangerously jealous one. "I'll be glad to help you find one for yourself if that's something you need help with..."

Chloe rolled her eyes and eyed up Victoria hungrily.

"It too late for that matchmaker, she's mine now, so why don't you make like a tree and get lost, Gaychel?" Chloe cut in, gripping onto poor Victoria tighter. "Victoria told me how she feels! How can I say no to that face?"

Rachel and Chloe looked at Victoria and found her both confused and angry. Chloe being attracted to that sounded about right. It took another moment before Victoria finally struggled enough to free herself from Chloe's comfortable grip on her. She launched herself back up to her feet and attempted to fix the hair which the girls had mussed up as she slept.

"Whatever, you two are so fucking awful... thanks for the sess, Price..." Victoria muttered at them before she straightened out the hem of her skirt and stormed out of the dorm room, leaving both girls in a fit of wild laughter at her expense. Rachel collapsed into Chloe, as the laughter coursed through her.

This was exactly what she had needed. She was so very grateful for Victoria Chase right about now.

As the laughter simmered, Rachel took over Victoria's place, resting her head in Chloe's lap. She looked up at the smiling girl above her, her expression not quite meeting her eyes. She was being thoughtful again. Rachel reached up, her fingers grazing against her girlfriend's chin.

"What is on your mysterious mind, Chloe Price? ... Let me into your secrets..." Rachel asked out loud, her voice gentle in its prodding.

Chloe remained silent for a moment; but she did look down on Rachel. She offered her a half smile as she ran her hand along Rachel's cheek.

"What I want is to skip out of town, never look back; and not just for the summer," Chloe said as she found her courage to speak, her voice was low and neutral. "I sound like a cliché, or like when you were younger... but... maybe you were on to something... maybe you were right all along. I don't... like being here. Think about it. We could do the Santa Monica plan. You and I could enroll into Santa Monica Community and finish school there. We can start our lives and not have to deal with any of this fucking shit... and I realize how fucking selfish it sounds with your Dad, and Sera and my Mom..."

Rachel reached up and touched Chloe's lips to silence her. She completely understood where Chloe was coming from. It was exactly how she still felt. It was so gratifying to know that Chloe was so eager... and so heartbreakingly painful to deny her this. As much as Rachel wanted to run, as much as she just wanted to start living a life without the ghosts of Mom and William and all the shit that came from it haunting the two of them, she just could not do that so freely.

As soon as she may have wanted this, it was not something they could just do now... not in the precarious state her Dad was in. She might still have resented him, but to seem him this unstable bothered her enough to feel obligated to at least help him find his footing.

Chloe, I... want that so much too..." she breathed up to her, trying to keep her emotions in check. "But... after everything, it's just not... right to abandon the others... not right now..."
The two of them lapsed into silence as guilt ate away at both of them. For Chloe it was the guilt of just wanting to leave as the two of them planned to do for so long now. For Rachel it was the guilt of wanting to stay, not wanting to further hurt those who were in their lives.

Rachel couldn't help it… she emitted a small laugh out of disbelief.

"Look at us…" she said to herself. "I'm becoming you, and you're becoming me…"

She thought that she was able to control herself. She thought she could be as mechanical as her father. But she couldn't and so Rachel felt the tears rolling down her cheek. She tried to blink them away so that Chloe didn't notice them, but it was far too late.

So she owned them, she sat up and buried her head into Chloe's chest, allowing Chloe's arms to immediately wrap her tightly in her embrace. The tears weren't for her Dad, or even for her Mom… they stemmed from an old guilt which had rushed into her mind.

"The night of the Tempest play, you said you couldn't just leave your Mom so suddenly, and I was… so disappointed in you for that moment…" Rachel admitted to her. "I get where you're coming from now, and I feel like a total bitch when I think about it… I'm so sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable… you deserved so much better than that."

As she trailed off, Rachel could not help but exhale a small whimper as Chloe pushed her hand through her hair to grip the back of her head. She felt… so incredibly safe like this…

"That was so long ago…" she heard her Chloe murmur just above her head. "You remember that from two years ago?"

Rachel nodded into Chloe's chest. Reluctantly, she pulled her head back so she could look up into those delicate baby blues eyes.

"Of course I did, Chloe…" She solemnly reassured Chloe, a smile returning to her mouth. "I remember every word we spoke; I remember every stolen touch I took from you… I remember our kiss… I remember the bliss I felt, I remember you pushing ash out of my hair as though it was ruining the moment… I remember it all. Every moment of that night will be with me until the very end. It's the first time that I actually believed true love was possible between two people… and here we are… still strong after everything."

Falling silent as a wave of insecurity hit her as Chloe sort of looked at her funny, like she was reconsidering everything. Chloe smiled sloppily, her intoxication was evident as she leaned in and kissed her.

"I love you, Rachel Amber…" was her simple affirmation. She paused and coyly added, "…but… you ever notice it seems like we only ever talk about serious shit?"

The tension broke and Rachel laughed, wiping the last of her tears from her eyes. She allowed her hands to reach outwards to grab onto Chloe's.

"I guess we just have serious shit to contend with… we don't always get to be cutesy and light…" she sniffled, still smiling for her stoned girlfriend as she climbed into her lap. "This summer we won't think about any of that… we'll chill out and roam the Pacific Northwest, it'll give us a chance to prepare for next summer in Cali… I just… I want to make sure my Dad is on both feet first, alright?"

Chloe nodded; there was no hesitation to it. It just seemed as though Chloe had wanted to express her growing frustrations with everything which kept piling on her… on them. At the end of the day,
however, she was going to stand by Rachel and face whatever hurdle and detour together.

Rachel could not have asked for a better partner to have...

"Alright," Rachel spoke up quietly, attempting to keep her voice dry. "So running away forever is back off the table for the time being; do you have a second idea for Madsen?"

Chloe remained still for a moment before she nodded reluctantly.

"Yeah… but I hate it so much," she muttered mutinously. "… Because I'm going to help that fucking dipshit get a job here."

It was Rachel's turn to be stunned.

Chloe looked as though she was going to be sick from the mere thought of committing an act of good will for Madsen. Rachel could not blame her for feeling that way. Not a small voice told her to tear that man to shreds every time she went over to Chloe's home. It was hard to forget these old, cold hates simmering inside of her. His irresponsibility could not just easily be forgotten by her.

"Helping him is the last thing I want to do… but… I do have a Mom I need to think about," Chloe attempted to rationalize her decision. "She can't just keep being the only pay check coming into their home; and that Fuckface does need to start contributing to the household as soon as possible… so if he's that eager for work, might as well do it for her."

Rubbing her face, Chloe emitted a groan at the thought of Madsen working where they went to school. It would seriously put a dent in their activities if not properly dealt with.

"I guess I could probably organize the skaters to raise some serious hell..." Rachel heard Chloe ponder as she too thought up a plan to help Chloe. "We could force Wells to drop the hammer on us and make him take campus security seriously."

Rachel bristled at the idea. This was classic Chloe: force people's hands by making herself the scapegoat. Risking Chloe was the last thing in the world which she ever wanted. Not when she had a better and simpler alternative right in the palm of her hand.

"Interesting," she said attempting to sound like she put serious consideration into Chloe's idea. "Or instead of risking your place here, you could save yourself the hassle and ask my Dad to put in a good word in for him."

At the mention of her Dad, she felt Chloe stiffen into her. Rachel understood where she was coming from. The idea of her Dad voluntarily wanting to help Madsen seemed completely far-fetched… but Rachel had certain… evidence to contradict that.

"I can't imagine him wanting to help David..." Chloe voiced the obvious and reasonable question.

Rachel nodded curtly as she once again brought her hand up to touch against Chloe's forehead.

"Neither can I, but I can imagine he'd want to help you… and don't give me that look, Chloe..." she warned her girl in a mock chastising. "Two years in and you still can't comprehend that he might actually love you like one of his own?"

Chloe rubbed her eyes tiredly and dropped her body down flat, taking the younger girl with her.

"I'm not exactly fond of the incest undertones right now..." she declared out loud as she wrapped an arm around Rachel to keep her at her side.
"Then fucking put a ring on it…” she suggested as she rolled off Chloe and instead took her place.

Rachel took a small mental victory lap as she watched Chloe tint pink at the mere mention of what their future might possibly hold. Still, she retained her composure as she fastened her grip onto the shorter girl.

"It’s a little soon for bending our knee for either of us," Chloe spoke over her head in barely more than a mumble. "How about we start by getting some ink first?"

Rachel felt her heart soar as she nestled into Chloe. It sounded like a damn fine idea to her.

Chapter End Notes

Last couple chapters were going to be one single one, but it would have been long and it would have inevitably affect the release time. Next chapter should speed things up a bit. I've been toying with a Pricefield one shot for a little while now. I may release it next, or I'll wait until Valentine's Day. Not sure.

Thank you as always for reading and your comments!

Up next: So the Amber's, the Madsen's, a Price and a Gearhardt sit down for a dinner...
It was Friday night, the eve of Rachloefest and both Chloe and Rachel were eager to get it over with.

It was becoming a serious logistical nightmare, making sure everyone invited was on the same page, making sure there was enough food and non-alcoholic drinks for those that didn't drink or needed something else than alcohol in them. This became especially necessary when Rachel had to go out of her way to invite the junior grades in order to wrestle control back out of the hands of the Vortex Club… or rather one particularly awful bitch who would remain nameless, but it was fun to watch her apologize nonetheless.

With everything prepared as best as they could, they ended the day by going to American Rust and installed locks on the entrance to the junk shack. American Rust might have been designated party zone for the students of Blackwell Academy, but the shed was for Chloe and Rachel.

Tonight, however, was going to be a little more serious. Joyce and Douchebag had insisted on her coming home for a nice home cooked meal.

With how rare it was for her to come home these days and the knowledge that Douchebag was sniffing around Blackwell for a job. Chloe and Rachel decided to plot and combine both their problems together. While Chloe's problems were Joyce's husband, for Rachel, her problem was her Dad. It wasn't his past that troubled her as much as how much of a social hermit he had become.

So tonight was about getting James out of the house, eating a half decent dinner and interacting with Joyce, who was a relatively good friend to even before what happened to Rose. James needed a friend outside of a teenager dating his daughter and an ex-wife who he was still conflicted over, and Joyce had the potential to fit the bill well. Especially given she knew where James must have been in his grief.

On top of this, it was decided by the girls (well, arbitrarily decided by Rachel) that after dinner, Chloe would pull James aside and see if he would be willing to help her Step-Douche get the position at Blackwell.

That was not a conversation she wanted to have with Rachel's father. Not when she could see the contempt for David in James' usually composed state at the mere passing mention of him. All that Chloe wanted was to maintain a positive relationship with Rachel's father, and honestly it felt like she had asked so much from him already. Yet Rachel kept insisting that it was alright. She believed that her Dad needed these sorts of challenges to help drag him out of his routine and force him to confront what had happened head on, and David Madsen was one of those issues that had to be dealt with.

For now, both Rachel and she were too busy enjoying the proverbial calm before the storm. Sitting on her bed, sharing cigarettes with Chloe propped up against the wall and Rachel sitting between her as they watched David Lynch's Dune. The most interaction they had done with Joyce was to help with dinner. It was an awkward mess full of Joyce raising Chloe for how well she had been doing in school.
It was not a conversation she wanted to have, because she just knew the fucking implication Joyce was making; that her surge in marks had been because she was getting over Dad or something. It wasn't a recovery that had motivated Chloe's marks; it was her desire to get through the year with as little incidents as possible and to remain in the same classes as Rachel, which was getting easier as she seemed to be sputtering as she had shortly after her Dad died.

Like Chloe before her, Rachel too had come to the realization that grades meant nothing at all in comparison to a loved one lost. Chloe was doing all she could to help Rachel through these dark moments, but it was not something someone could just talk someone through. This was a vicious psychodrama which both girls just had to go through to reach the other side... so that they both could come back into some sense of peace and normalcy.

Chloe watched as Rachel's hand unconsciously reached back and wrapped around the top vertebrae in her neck. Dad's watch – a permanent fixture now to her fashion – rolled right to the bottom of her palm, revealing more of the lines of vicious looking scar tissue that had healed over her wounds. It was a terrible and rarely talked about reminder of that night.

Everyone remembered what had had happened to Rose of course, but no one but her bore witness to the absolute rage and fury Rachel flew into in the minutes after her murder. She broke fucking everything she saw. Even after she slashed her wrist and arm open she kept going, the blood splattering across everything she hit and wherever she stumbled. It took a serious amount of blood loss before Rachel had slowed her fury just enough for Chloe to finally tackle and subdue her, all of this while she had a freshly broken foot.

As bad as it was, it was what had happened next that scared her more than the fury. She just sort of collapsed into a state of what Chloe could only have described as catatonia. She just went limp and unblinking, the only thing she could do was breathe. It was probably the second scariest fucking thing she'd ever seen…

But that was the past now. An incident which neither girl dared to even breathe to each other; and as for the scars, Rachel had been toying with adding another tattoo to the list she had in mind for when they got out of Arcadia Bay and found somewhere to ink them without hassle. Something to honour Rose with; not that Rose was a particular fan of tattoos.

Chloe ceased her thoughts. As they watched Paul Atredes teach the Weirding Way to the Fremen, Rachel stretched out over Chloe's form like a sunbathing cat. The movement allowed her tight black shirt to ride up, revealing her midriff and the faint outline of pink boy shorts she was wearing underneath her short as fuck shorts.

A small awful sort of grin slowly formed over Chloe's mouth as she took in all the skin revealed, which was begging for the affection from her. Rachel paid no mind to the obvious. Judging from her inability to look back at Chloe or even acknowledge what she was doing, she fucking knew exactly what she was doing. It was a weird little cue which Chloe always fell for.

Chloe wrapped her arms around her girl, forcing Rachel to emit a small pleased sounding sigh. Still she focused on the movie as intently as she could, but Chloe watched in silent agony as Rachel's legs opened and closed slowly. It was the lure which could not be avoided. So Chloe refused to pretend there was a choice. They'd be cutting it a little close… but she wasn't about to turn the invitation down.

With her left arm still tight around Rachel, her free right hand was allowed to push itself lower, her fingers grazing Rachel's exposed, taut abdomen, inching lower and lower, forcing Rachel's body to stiffen. Chloe could see from the corn of her eye that although she remained firmly fixated on the movie, Rachel's mouth had opened, only for her to clamp down on her bottom lip as Chloe's fingers
gripped the edge of her boy shorts. Chloe felt the grip Rachel had around the back of her neck tightened.

Rachel leaned back, gently nipping Chloe's ear.

"As much as I enjoy your instant gratification streak, I think you should delay your playtime until later…" Rachel breathed into Chloe's ear. "Besides, there's another reason why we installed deadbolts on our shed…"

Still gripping the hem of Rachel's shorts and underwear, Chloe emitted a small playful groan at Rachel's denial had only fuelled her desires even more. Reluctantly she released her grasp on her under and allowed Rachel to roll over, her shit eating grin now driving Chloe nuts.

"You're killing me here…" she mumbled to the girl in her arms.

Rachel gave a small amount of pity on Chloe and leaned in, her lips pushing against Chloe's. For a fraction of a second Rachel's tongue touched her before she pulled back, their lips only barely touching each other's.

"Under any other circumstances, I wouldn't stop you… but the last thing we need is being obvious in front of the old people…" Rachel spoke into her lips. "Besides, now we get to play one of my favourite games: Entice the Price…"

As if on cue the two of them heard a knock on the front door, and a 'CHLOE, COULD YOU GET THAT?!' shouted below them from Joyce. Rachel emitted a small playful pout, pausing the movie as she pushed herself off her and offered a hand out towards Chloe.

"So it begins…" Rachel murmured as she pulled Chloe off the bed and into her arms with a small giggle.

Ignoring her sexual frustration to the best of her ability, Chloe nodded and silently she allowed herself to be dragged downstairs by her box tease of a girlfriend.

...

...

Her heart was pounding in her chest, but regardless of that internal pain radiating through her body, Rachel Amber still led her Chloe out of the bedroom and towards the stairs.

She knew her Dad would be on his best acting game while in the presence of someone else's home – he saved his brooding for when he was alone - but this was different. He was at the Price-Madsen home while David was home… and to say Dad wasn't a friend to David was an understatement.

Like daughter like father, Dad too generally ghosted the man whenever he could, but Dad was a ticking fucking time bomb. He wasn't afforded the outlets Chloe gave to her through drugs, drinking and wandering off to isolated junkyards to smash the living fuck out of inanimate objects.

Now here they were, about to ask her Dad to help Madsen get a job… God, this had disaster written all over it. She could only guide Chloe to seeking out Dad's help, but she could not speak for her. That was up to Chloe, and Chloe was not exactly a bastion of subtly. It was something she thought was endearing, but not playing anyone any favour today; but while Chloe lacked grace, she would trust Chloe to speak from her heart, and hopefully that would be enough to convince him to
It probably would… in a weird way, Chloe was sort of the son he never had… which was fine by…

As Chloe opened the door, Rachel felt her brain shutdown and all the thoughts ceased, because there standing in the doorway next to Dad was Mom… well, Sera…

Sera stood there, looking extremely conflicted by being here as much as Rachel had been. For all intents and purposes, Sera was just a colleague to Joyce. For the past two years, the truth of the nature of Rachel and Chloe's relationship was that they were friends in the eyes of Joyce and other outsiders.

If she recalled correctly, Joyce thought that Sera and Dad were having an affair, which was apparently about to be proven half right in a hilarious twist of fate.

As stunned as she was, as she looked to Chloe, she noticed Chloe wasn't bothered at all by the development. If anything she seemed pleased that Sera was here. Perhaps it would help ease the tension between David and James to have a relative newcomer step in.

"Oh look, your Dad went ahead and made this night even more awkward…" Chloe spoke happily. "Sera... get over here, you cutie."

Sera didn't get to move because Chloe stepped forward and enveloped Sera into her standard bone crushing hug which she gave to Sera nearly time ever since she got her hugging privileges granted. There was a time where Rachel thought Price was going to break her, but these days Sera seemed to have adapted.

"Very funny…" Sera spoke up as she returned the gesture. "But I think you're giving Rachel impressions…"

Releasing Sera from her hug, Chloe maintained her grip on Sera's shoulder as she turned back to face Rachel whom had raised her brow as she observed the affections between her girlfriend and her biological mother. Sure enough, Sera's observations were on point as a fucking weird tinge running through her had caught her off balance. It was a stupid illogical feeling she got on occasion.

"I can't help it, Rachel. She's just cute as a button! If the stars are aligned I'm gonna have hella luck when you get old!" Chloe gushed playfully as she released Sera finally, unaware of the annoyance that streaked through Sera.

Deciding not to give any more credence to her irrationality and start shit with her own biological mother, Rachel smacked Chloe's arm directed her attention to her silently observing father, who was carrying a bottle of wine and a tin of pastries for Joyce. He seemed extremely uncomfortable about being here, yet resigned to face the Price-Madsen's after so long of avoiding interactions with both of them present.

"Hey, Dad…" she greeted him with a small smile. "What's exactly happening right now?"

Dad and Sera shared a look, like it was a matter that they had been discussing together for some time now. They did not need to voice the answer because Rachel already knew. With the two girls leaving in two weeks, it seemed inevitable that Joyce needed to be aware of the truth.

Chloe and she might have had an agenda of their own tonight, but Dad and Sera seemed to have an agenda as well.
Rachel stepped back into the Price house and allowed Dad and Sera entrance, with Chloe trailing behind them. She seemed just as uncomfortable about this as Rachel was, but had managed to keep it under wraps so far. Quietly the girls followed the former couple down the hall and into the living room where David was setting the table. As David glanced up and noticed James was standing there, he nearly fumbled the plate.

"Mr. Amber…" David managed to get out, uncharacteristically fidgety as Dad remained silent for a moment longer.

"Mr. Madsen," Dad spoke curtly. "…You're doing well, I trust?"

Rachel glanced to Chloe who had grabbed her hand and looked almost gleeful at the position David was in now. It was clear that there was no love lost between her and the man who married her mother, but Rachel felt a small trickling of sympathy for Madsen. There was no real right answer he could give to the question. Not with the clear antipathy radiating from her Dad.

Luckily for David, he was spared the impossible answer to give Dad as Joyce appeared bringing in a bowl of stringed beans. Knowing Joyce she was intervening in the nick of time. She seemed ready to greet Dad, but as soon as she noticed her co-worker standing there in the dining area, like David before her she too had to pause at the sight.

"Sera?" Joyce spoke up, uncharacteristically confused by Dad's plus one. "It's always nice to see you, darling but... is everything alright?"

Sera smiled and nodded.

"Everything is fine, Joyce," she reassured. She turned to David and added. "David, it is nice to see you again."

As David nodded curtly to Sera's greeting while Joyce had an unspoken question on her lips, the air in the room went thick with unresolved tension created by Sera's mere presence. Rachel squeezed Chloe's hand for support as she watched her Dad turn around and directed his attention to his daughter fully.

"Rachel, would you like to clear the air, or should I?" he carefully prodded her.

Looking from her Dad to Sera, who was sort of smiling thinly. She looked almost petrified herself. Rachel exhaled and let go of Chloe's hand. She took her place next to her biological mother and took her hand as she turned and looked Joyce right square in the eye.

"Joyce… You know Sera already…" she said, gesturing to the woman next to her. "But Sera is my birth mom."

Rachel's utterance of the truth only made Joyce blink. She appeared far too flabbergasted to do much of anything else. She turned her eyes from Rachel to Dad and Sera. Both of them stood there just as silent as the implications became clearer for Joyce and David.

"You… two… you both were together?" Joyce asked the two of them in a daze.

Rachel felt her Dad's hand fall on her shoulder and found her herself gently led back to Chloe so that the formerly married couple were properly standing together. With Rachel next to them for a moment, they almost seemed like a proper couple; A strange little family of sorts...

Above her Dad nodded, confirming Joyce's question.
"We're sorry to have deceived you for so long," Dad addressed the shocked mother and her husband. "More importantly we're sorry that we had to swear Chloe to secrecy for as long as she did."

"I'm sorry for omitting the truth, but I wanted to respect the wishes of James and Rose…” Sera added almost over top of Dad. "After what happened… it didn't feel right to talk about it until James and Rachel were ready."

At the mention of Chloe by Dad, Joyce had redirected her attention to her daughter. Chloe stood there, knowing full well of her part in keeping the truth hidden for as long as she did. She did not seem ashamed for the deception she played a role in, but she seemed to recognize that her mother was going to be understandably upset.

"Chloe… you once said Sera protected you," Joyce recalled, her voice strained she struggle to maintain her self-control. "Was that the truth? Or was just part of the deception."

Biting her lip, Chloe rubbed her neck.

"Well…If it wasn't for Sera, Rachel wouldn't exist and be around to save my ass…” Chloe spoke up, her mouth forming a small grin in spite of everything. "It's the truth… in a roundabout way…"

As Rachel took Chloe's hand again, smirking slightly at the somewhat smartass answer she had provided to Joyce and everyone, Dad could only snort.

"I think we have a future corporate attorney in our presence…” he muttered out loud as Joyce stepped back and gestured for them to join her at the table.

…

Dinner was interesting to say the least.

Mom… Joyce had a shit ton of questions for Sera and Rachel. She had years to catch up ahead of her. To her credit, Sera answered everything she was asked with the same sort of patience she had shown Rachel years prior. Thankfully Mom's questions were not nearly as intimate as Rachel's were. She didn't need the picture painted as much as Rachel had needed. She probably picked up more than a bit from Sera's past over the few years they had been working together already.

As Sera, Rachel and Joyce spoke, the other dinner guests ate in silence. Dickbag David would occasionally look up to see if James was watching him; but his paranoia was unfounded. James ate in silence, only occasionally acknowledging Sera and Rachel if they spoke about him.

This silence gave Chloe a chance to figure out how to swallow her pride and help Dickbag David out with his employment woes or at least try to. So as soon as she noticed James was mostly done with what as in front of him, she gently kicked Rachel's ankle. It caught her attention and she watched Chloe glance to her Dad. Rachel smiled for her, her hand reaching out to squeeze her knee in some sort expression of luck.

Setting down her fork, Chloe exhaled and tapped James's shoulder. The man stiffened at the touch and turned to face her.

"James, could I speak with you… privately?” she requested, pursing her lips together, her eyes flickering to the women chatting, two out of three.
James frowned slightly, but he nodded curtly and pushed back his chair as she did. Silently Chloe took the lead, the only other person at the table noticing other than Rachel was David; but neither of them acknowledged him.

In silence, Chloe led James up the stairs towards her room. She thought about taking him outside, but decided against it. There were too many ways for David to eavesdrop on them when they were outside; and he knew fucking better than to approach her room whenever she was home. It was the quickest way to start a fight, and David knew that any fight he had with Chloe would collapse into a bloodbath.

She opened the door to her room and silently ushered Rachel's Dad in. The smell and haze of cigarette smoke and weed hitting the two of them immediately. James could not help but chuckle as he glanced around. No doubt he had seen pictures of her room in the police reports, but this was his first time inside… as far as she knew.

"This room is very… you…" James levelled to her.

As he turned back face Chloe, he got to watch as Chloe scooted by him to sit down on the edge of her bed where Rachel had left a pile of bras and underwear. It was an action not lost on James, who crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'm going to assume those are yours, don't break the illusion," James added on, his voice surprisingly light all things considered. "Now what did you need to see me about?"

Lacing her fingers in her lap, Chloe looked up at him. It was now or never.

"I need to ask a favour from you, James," Chloe bit the bullet. "It's an awful thing to ask, but David is trying to get a position in Blackwell's campus security and I would like it if you could put in a good word in to the hiring people."

James remained motionless as he seemed to be processing the request Chloe asked from him. Any of the good humour he had had hardened in his eyes at the mere thought of helping David Madsen. He stepped forward towards her computer desk and slumped down into her chair, his eyes never leaving hers. It felt as though James was back in his work mode, a cool analytical expression had erased all his humanity.

"The man couldn't protect you or Joyce. Why would I want to entrust the lives of numerous students to him?" he asked her pointedly.

"He…" Chloe started, unable to believe what she was doing for that moustached dickbag douche downstairs. "David made a mistake…"

James, however, was not nearly as forgiving.

"No, this was carelessness at its best, incompetence at its worse," James interjected, his eyes narrowing at her. "No way will I give him my blessing to protect students without some serious changes on his part. Not when he has obvious unchecked mental health problems…and if even if half the things my daughter told me he's said to you in the past few years are true, I wouldn't expect him to understand how to keep his behavior in check…"

Chloe had to avert her eyes from James gaze as his revelation that Rachel had told him about every fight, every argument, every insult she witnessed came to light. Chloe always assumed that when it came to David, it was in one ear out the other for Rachel, but no. Rachel was listening and she was keeping James informed the entire time. Under any other circumstances, she would love to know
Rachel was this protective of her, but right now it was not helping win David James support.

"It was nothing..." Chloe spoke up, fighting the shame out of her voice. "David and I fight… it’s nothing at all."

Clearly not buying anything she was attempting to play down, James slid the chair closer to her. He leaned forward to get himself down into Chloe's line of sight.

"It not nothing, Chloe; we had this conversation an age ago. You knew you could have told me," James reminded her, his voice softening somewhat. "Everything that affects you matters to Rachel… and to me..."

Chloe looked up to see if James was just offering a platitude, but the small smile he wore told her that as usual he was not just saying something to ease her conscience. Chloe reluctantly nodded, deciding to trust James again.

"James, David got serious fucking problems, and I'm not asking you to forgive him. I don't forgive him, and the last thing I want is for him to be up in Rachel and my business at school," she finally spoke to him. "...but I'm not asking this for him. I'm asking this for Joyce. I mean take a look around, we aren't poor as dirt, but we're close to it. We don't have your pull; if it wasn't for you, I'd be sitting around here doing nothing… but I'm going to school now and I'm doing better than I thought I would be. That's because of you."

She didn't know if she was making sense at all, she probably wasn't, but James wasn't angry anymore. He seemed to be listening, and that was a good sign.

"I know I have no business asking you for more then you've given, but my… mom… she deserves a little less burden on her then the shit she's been dealt," she continued, Rachel's father listening closely. "That scholarship for me was a start, but David needs regular work... and I feel like a total bitch for saying this… but if I matter to you at all, then Joyce has to matter to you as well… as much shit as I give her… I still love her."

Her piece was said and silence fell between James and Chloe. James continued to stare at Chloe, as though he was searching her soul. He barely blinked, he barely moved. Chloe sat there her, hand in her lap as she waited for the completely understandable refusal. Below them, the two of them could here Rachel, Sera and Joyce laugh about something.

James reached out, her fingers gripping hers.

"You're not a bitch for saying any of that," James finally said, his fingers squeezing hers. "You're a good daughter, Chloe Price. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise…"

With a final squeeze and shake, James let go of her hand and pushed his chair back, leaving Chloe somewhat embarrassed by the praise, she fought the small blushing forming and rubbed her eyes as she stood up from her seat.

"So…" Chloe spoke as she quickly threw all of Rachel's underwear underneath her bed covers. "Will you do it then?"

James scrunched up his face at the question. It was enough to make Chloe smile as she watched Rachel's father nod, his hand outstretched to her.

"Give me your cigarettes and send David up here…” he requested from her. "I want to talk this over with him… alone."
Relief flooded over her, Chloe nodded and bent over the side of her bed to retrieve her pack of smokes and ashtray and handed them both to James. Her cigarettes were a tax she was more than willing to pay for her Mom's financial relief.

"Really though… thank you, James," Chloe sighed, exhaling heavily as she added. "…and please, this wasn't my idea… okay?"

With one final nod from James, accepting that Chloe didn't want to be seen helping Deputy Fuckface. Chloe left the room to James, trying not to burst into a happy little skip at the thought that she had perhaps done something really fucking good for someone else for once…

Christ, David had better not fuck this chance up...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and sorry for the delay, I had that one shot in the works for quite some time and it was starting to get in the way. Back to the regular three day releases.

Next up: Rachloefest
Victoria Chase stood there together with the Vortex Club, yet alone. Out of everyone with her, it seemed like she alone could not fucking believe she was about to party in a literal junkyard. 

She had the better part of a month to digest the idea but standing here now she felt unnaturally nervous; because even if she had time to prepare, she was still stepping into uncharted territory. This insecurity was probably the worst feeling she could have right now. Especially when she knew that the hosts of this gathering would be buzzing around her, showing her that they were so much better at hosting these sorts of affairs then she could ever be. 

The party had seemed to have started hours ago. Rachel was true to her word had managed to relay dozens of junior students from Blackwell to the Junkyard apparently called 'American Rust'. Numbers of nameless kids were there in various states of intoxication. All of them watching as the Blackwell Elite approached through them towards the centre of the party. All of them mistrustful of them after the Courtney incident and the Rachel clean up. 

Only one member of the Vortex Club was missing and that was Nathan. He had been summoned home by his Dad for a dinner party. It wasn't just a family thing though; Sean Prescott only summoned his son when it was in his interest to do so. It was all very hush-hush but apparently they were courting the famous photographer Mark Jefferson into taking up a teaching position at Blackwell. 

Mark Jefferson… If the Prescott’s pulled off this coup, it would greatly increase the visibility of both the school and her own chances of making her fledgling talent into something on a professional career course. It was a real chance to finally step out of her parent's fucking shadow and into something she built for herself. 

"Damn, those two actually pulled it off... Impressive" Victoria heard Dana Ward speak approvingly as she stepped by Victoria, 

Dana was being trailed by Zach and Logan, one or both of whom she was no doubt was going to fuck tonight… Or she'd try her luck with Juliet… honestly Dana Ward was a confusing mess these days thanks to Rachel and Chloe making it chic to be out in the open. Dana Ward had turned into an ambiguous wildcat on the prowl. Victoria supposed a ho would be a ho regardless. 

The fire had to be huge, because the sky was a brilliant red, clashing with the neon green and blue mood lights and the seemingly endless strings of Christmas lights which flickered on and off like cheap strobe lights. It was total punk trash chic, but somehow fit into the theme this party was. She had expected that the party would be nothing but that droning noise that blared from their dorm every morning, but instead very entrancing Autechre. 

That was when Victoria and by extension the Club saw them; because they had become neon angels. 

Rachel Amber and Chloe Price were wearing torn vintage wedding dresses, drenched in glowing neon paint. Chloe's was a little less girly. Form fitting, but conservative… but it was a dress
nonetheless. Victoria could only imagine the fight Rachel must have had to get her in it; but it worked. Rachel was far more decked out, her wedding dress frilly and long dragging in the mud.

In exchange of the bridal veils, both of them were wearing fucking funeral veils. It was a creepy fucking contrast of vibrancy in the colour, love in the dress and death in their head wear which brought Victoria to a cold understanding that they weren't just throwing this party for the fuck of it.

Today was the anniversary of day they had buried Rose Amber.

If that was the reason they through this celebration, no one knew for sure. Most were watching as the two of them were ritualistically dancing around the massive bonfires, waving blue road flares high over their heads. Chloe surprisingly moved more fluid of the two, while Rachel was more violent, more explosive. The smoke of the flares followed their movements like shadows and engulfed them as though they were the sources, as if they were the fire.

Occasionally they collided into each other, their bodies touching, their lips meeting; unabashed and unashamed in their public affections. After all this was their party. Everyone else was just tourists, venturing into their private world for the evening.

The first ones to make a noise was Logan and Zachary, both of them wolf-whistling leeringly at the sight of the girlfriends as their bodies pushed together and moved in perfect harmony; Chloe, calming Rachel down and Rachel firing Chloe up until they both met in the middle. Through the fire and smoke Victoria could see the huge grins on their faces as they pressed their noses together and moved back and of them cared for Zach and Logan, or anyone for that matter. In their world, everyone else was just a bug to step on or a pawn to play with.

Rachel was the first to look their way. Chloe was too busy sucking on Rachel's neck. She did not move out of her girlfriend's grip but instead through her flares into the fire. A move imitated by Chloe so that she could wrap her arms around Rachel's body.

"Welcome, dearest Vortex Club to this, our humblest of festivals!" Rachel greeted in a high pitched stage voice as she struggled to stay in control with Price's lips wrapped around her neck. "Please help yourself to refreshments and whatever you find edible. Please keep any sexual activities consensual because my lovely Chloe reserves the right to take a fucking crowbar to anyone's knee if you act out against this rule in particular!"

Price pulled her mouth away from Rachel's neck, and then it was Rachel's turn to latch onto to Price, it was far more aggressive, from here Victoria could see teeth; it actually made Price's legs quiver.

"Consider yourselves lucky, Rachel talked me down from genital swipes," Price managed to echo out to them. "Second, you will not liquor up the junior partyers any more than they already have. They drink and smoke what they bring, and you drink, smoke, pop and snort what you bring. And what do you suppose will happen if you break this rule?"

"Let me guess. You take a crowbar to our knees!" Hayden Jones shot out as though it was a competition.

Chloe blinked at the answer she got and looked to Rachel, who was smirking.

"Nice initiative, Hayden, but no. What do you think I am… a maniac?" Price spoke again, a little surprised. "No… you get sent off and any party in the future we throw, you don't get the invite!"

Price rolled her eyes as if Hayden had been completely off the mark. It was probably bullshit on
her part; she just didn't want to be upstaged by a guest.

"Final rule: Stay the fuck away from the shack!" Price pressed on, gesturing to the run down painted old garbage shack. "That is an officially designated Rachloe zone. If I catch any of you fuckboys or fuckgirls peeping, that's when I get to take the crowbar to your genitals -"

Rachel reached out and pressed her hand against Chloe's mouth and allowed a dazzlingly false smile for all of them to take in.

"Other than that, please have fun, get lit and dance the night away!" Rachel concluded, stepping the two of them out of the way and gesturing the new guests to come in and co-mingle with the younger and less prolific Blackwell students.

As the gathering of Vortex Club kids broke apart into their various subgroups, Victoria naturally standing alone with Taylor at her side. Taylor herself was looking around incredulously, and obviously impressed at how they turned a literal junkyard into something almost liveable. It had been strange but it seemed as though Taylor was gravitating more and more into the orbit of Chloe and Rachel, or at the very least she decided to be friendly to them, which as probably more likely. Taylor was very much into the Vortex Club scene.

Victoria looked around as the theory she was toying with was becoming true. In her and Nathan's efforts in driving out the less savoury elements out of the Vortex Club to make way for rich and ambitious, they had left many at the sidelines. Followers, poor people, losers they may be, but all of them were looking for a guide. A guiding force which they found in Rachel and Chloe.

It now appeared that Amber and Price had effectively placed the entire school population minus the Vortex Club under their dominion. The worst part… the absolute worst part was that somewhere in this sea of juniors were future Vortex club members, who would take what they learned from Rachel and Chloe's shitty fucking theme of inclusivity and re-fucking-apply it back into the Vortex Club, effectively nullifying everything Nathan and her had achieved.

Victoria wanted nothing more than to rip the fucking flesh from the two smug cunts standing in front of her… but she just couldn't. She had to hand it to them. Whether they knew it or not (Rachel probably, but Price was a bit more short term) they had out played her, choosing to take short term losses in high profile positions to Victoria to achieve a total victory in the near future.

…And here Victoria was fucking helping them celebrate their win!

The bitches deserved to burn… but not tonight.

"Hello Victoria, hello Taylor," Rachel finally greeted the two of them, breaking their silence. "We're glad you both managed to make it."

"Thank you for the invite…" Taylor spoke suddenly, startling the three social superiors she stood with. "After what happened I thought-"

Rachel raised her hand up to silence her, a drunken smile was on her face and it shone for Taylor.

"Welcome to the party, Taylor," she reiterated as she reached out and dropped her hand on Taylor's shoulder. "Courtney's shit does not reflect on you."

Next to Rachel, Price nodded her head up and down sloppily.

"You're cool as fuck, when you want to be…" Price added in her two cents because of fucking course she had to. "You keep it up and you'll overshadow certain people who start with V and end
Furrowing her brow as Taylor shot them a dazzling smile, Victoria stepped forward towards the two hostesses. Rachel had the good enough grace to look at least somewhat genial, but Price... Price looked triumphant. She had Victoria Chase in a subservient position and she was only too eager to assert her dominion over her.

She remained silent, only glancing to Taylor for a moment to suggest to her that it was in her best interest to leave right now and give Rachel, Price and her some room. Taylor thankfully obliged and ran off to join both Dana and Juliet who were currently chatting with a reject in a beanie. The mega dyke who was too open with her nerd passions and never got a girlfriend of her own, primarily because she set her goals too impossibly high to achieve.

Victoria turned back and was nearly startled by how close both girls were into her personal space. It was obviously that they were both drunk and stoned off their asses already. The liquor and weed could be smelled now wafting off them. She ignored their stupid smiles through their veils, she ignored Price's narrowed, luscious baby blues and the fiery hazel of Rachel's as she seemed to inspect Victoria standing there before them in a blouse and slacks. Completely out of place for a low class party like this, but neither of the wedding dress wearing lesbo girls seemed to mind.

Blinking as she averted her eyes from the two girls across from her, Victoria inwardly cursed herself. She would not be entranced, not by the likes of them. She was not like them. Not at all; and she would keep telling herself that until it was irrefutable. She exhaled and forced herself to get a fucking grip and swallow a lot more than just her simple pride.

"Rachel, Price... this is honestly the weirdest fucking party location I've ever been to with easily the weirdest fucking hosts..." Victoria spoke slowly as she looked back to the quasi rivals. "... but... it's not bad for a couple of fashion disasters."

Rachel crossed her arms over her chest. She glanced up to Chloe, whom had clamped her eyes shut. She reached out and gently nudged her girlfriend

You hear that, Priceless?" Rachel said without missing a beat. "She hates our outfits... now you got to like wearing it."

Rachel glowered and moodily pulled at the gown she wore. She could hate it all she wanted, but that punk trash could really pull off a dress if only she tried...

Victoria gave herself another mental shake. These were those thoughts she was not to have.

"Well, we'll take that as a compliment," Rachel said on behalf of herself and her silent companion. Her hand reached out and grabbed Price's shoulder as she added. "We really are glad you made it, Victoria... You've been a very good... egg to us and neither of us have forgotten our secret frenemy status."

"The Rachloe love nest is now open to one very, very special pixie secret girlfriend..." Price immediately added. "No homo, of course... unless you're ready to drop the fuck charade-"

Chloe's thoughts were brought to a standstill as Rachel reached up and kissed her deeply. Victoria winced at the wet sound she could hear from where she stood. She was just grateful the fire was so massive that the heat radiating off it could mask the embarrassment brewing in her.

"Let's not scare her off too fast..." Rachel breathed to her as she pulled back.

Price glanced to the obviously discomforted Victoria and nodded, leaving Victoria scrambling for a
distraction… which thankfully she had been provided by an absent friend.

"Oh…" Victoria said as she opened her purse and fumbled inside. "Nathan sends his apologies for not making it, and has offered a gift."

Feeling a small baggie at the bottom, Victoria pulled it out flashed and flashed the small baggie with a half dozen circular pills inside. She stood there, expecting that the girls in front of her knew exactly what they were looking at. It was something Nathan had to name before she understood; but neither of the girls seemed to know for sure, they had their guesses and they didn't seem too particularly thrilled by what they were looking at.

"Molly? MDMA? I'm sorry I figured you burn outs would know right away," Victoria haughtily explained as though she was an expert just to rub their ignorance in their face; it was a small victory of the Neon Angels, but she would take it as she added. "They're uncut… apparently. He figured it was only right to offer up a small token of apology."

Rachel and Price looked at each other, wordlessly debating whether or not they wanted to do it. Victoria crossed her arms over her chest and puffed herself out more than she usually had. In truth she was no less nervous than they obviously were. This was her first experience and from the written instructions Nathan had left her, she was a little worried. He suggested that she only take half a pill and the pop the other half thirty to forty minutes later. It was a lot more complicated than sitting around getting drunk and smoking up…

Rachel turned back, radiating a small little smile for her. There was obvious refusal was in her face, but Victoria decided against teasing her over it. They had every right to be as worried as she was.

"It's very… tempting… but can we rain check the E trip, preferably at a time when we aren't hosting a party in the middle of nowhere?" Rachel said causally. "We have to be relatively sober for this hosting. In a few hours the kids are going to really feeling it and we need to be alert."

Price stepped forward, one arm still gripping her woman's waist. She snatched the baggie out of Victoria's hand and carefully examined it.

"Why don't you give it a test run and we'll take care of you," she said as she handed the bag back into the waiting hands of the slightly glaring Chase. "We'll drop some next week before you fuck off back to wherever you're from. We'll watch anime which isn't entry-level bullshit like what you watch, cool yeah?"

Deciding against saying where she was from in case Rachel and her Price showed up on her doorsteps with that rusted out piece of shit truck and in need of a place to stay for the duration of the summer, Victoria bit the proverbial bullet and opened the baggie. Without blinking, she snapped a single pill in half and dry swallowed the half pill powder. It was a bitter mess but she was in no position to chicken shit out now.

Looking up as she swallowed, she noticed triumphantly as Rachel and Price blinked as if they were impressed by the rash action. In spite of her incoming head trip, it was another small victory she took.

"You're on, bitches…" Victoria capitalized on their stunned shock. "But… you two… better take care of me, right?"

Blinking, Price was the first one to turn back to look to Rachel. Rachel turned back to and in silence they debated the request Victoria had made. She wasn't sure if the pill was already kicking in or her own paranoia overwhelming her, but she could have sworn she heard one of them say 'We'll play it
The girls sealed whatever they were thinking with a kiss and with a final smirk; Rachel turned and waved goodbye to Victoria.

"I suppose we'll have to see, Icky Vicky... see you later!" Rachel taunted her, using Price's fucking nickname.

Victoria blinked as she watched the two of them walk away hand in hand, leaving her with no definitive answer and minutes away from experiencing her very first exploration into the wild world of amphetamines alone. Swallowing the knot in her throat and determined not to do this alone, she moved as swift as she could to find Taylor and see if she'd join her in the trip.

Behind her she heard Price laugh. Whether it was at her or in general, she did not know. All she knew for sure was that she really did hate those two fucking bitches right about now…

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter I know. I had ambitious multi-chapter plans, but honestly I'm getting to a point where I just want to hurry up and this was bogging me down. It didn't come out on time because my power was on and off over the weekend, slowing me down even further.

Anyways, enough of that. Thanks for reading and all your kind words!

Next Chapter: No more next times previews. Nothing sinister, in fact it'll be kinda sweet (maybe) I just feel I give too much away. Back to it being me to tell, and you to find out. See you soon!
Her head was a blur in a way which she had never felt before. She had hangovers but this felt so much... lighter... like she was floating above regular consciousness... if that made any sense.

She looked around and could not believe where she was... she was in some sort of... a shack? Was this even real life? Whatever it was it was low class, a collage of magazine cut outs of models and bands, pictures of people... notably Rose Amber with Rachel. The words 'CHLOE WAS HERE' and 'RACHEL WAS HERE' was screeched on the wall in marker.

It was little wonder why this place was off limits by the hosts of the party. It felt like it was a sort of shrine to the two of them.

Rubbing her eyes, Taylor Christensen laid back down on the bundled up paint sheet she used as a pillow and attempted to recollect herself.

With the shack maybe half the size of her dorm room, Taylor turned her head from side to side and immediately found the other occupants of the shed. Cuddled together on the beaten up old couch was more than likely Rachel and Chloe. On her left and lying next to the door on her side, using a jacket that looked like it belonged to Chloe as a pillow was Victoria, probably still fast asleep.

She didn't remember much of last night. She did a lot of dancing with Victoria, Dana and surprisingly Steph Gingrich, who was kinda cooler than she had been led to believe. She drank a little but the Molly she took more then took care of her intoxication needs. She remembered she was pulled aside by Chloe or Rachel on occasion and they would force her to drink water or takes breaks. It was sort of a buzz kill at the time, but it was greatly appreciated now that she was waking up in a relatively okay state.

As she prepared to face the day, a ragged breathing and a small whimper caught her attention from the couch.

Taylor knew exactly what it was, she wasn't a fucking moron, but like a car crash, she just had to look. When two people were obviously banging, who in their right mind didn't look?

So she did just that...

Taylor turned her head and took in the sight of Rachel laying there, covered in blankets with only her head exposed out. Her eyes were thankfully closed. Around where her waist was the blank was budging from Chloe Price's form. She was hunched under the blanket clearly doing... whatever it was gay girls did. She watched in silence as one of Rachel's hands gripped the arm of the couch, the other gripped the bulging blanket... probably Chloe's head. Still she was breathing sharply, holding herself back...

This was really happening. Victoria was passed out next to the door and the Queen of Blackwell was getting eaten out on her other side, the words 'baby, you're doing so good girl' escaping Rachel's lips only added to the awkwardness even further. Neither of them seemed to care that there were other occupants in their shed.
Fuck her life; fuck everything about it right now. She had no idea what else to do but lay there and pretend to be asleep and listen to the Punk girl desecrating the Victoria's rival. Slightly revolted by herself, Taylor opened her eyes. She just had to look again. Call it a curiosity; she doubted something like this would happen again.

Taylor looked over and found Rachel had rolled her head to one side and was now looking down on the frozen voyeur. She did not look mad or even annoyed. She instead appeared to be amused. Her chest was rising up and down as she seemed close. Her hand clutching Chloe's blanket covered head pushed Chloe hard into her pelvis.

"Morning Taylor," Rachel breathed to her, her eyes hooded as she looked Taylor dead in the eyes. "Did you have a good time? Must have… you have Victoria's lipstick on your lips…"

Taylor instinctively rubbed her mouth. Sure enough Victoria brand lipstick had graces hers. Heat rose back to her face, hotter than that off a girl getting oral just a few feet from her. Those pills must have really loosened the two of them up, or Victoria in particular.

"Nobe fuggin wae!" Taylor heard from under the blanket. It was Chloe and apparently she still had a mouthful of… well… Rachel, judging on the way Rachel gasped and jumped slightly.

Rachel recollected herself and pat Chloe's blanket covered head like a pet.

"Baby, swallow before you speak…" Rachel teased her girlfriend before she turned back to the numb Taylor and smiled as she sweetly added. "Say, could you do us a huge favour? Could you, like, collect Victoria and take off? Kind of making up for a missed opportunity here… hosting Rachloefest was a time consumer for us."

Taylor could not have been happier to have an out granted as quickly as this. It would certainly be a story to tell Vic… eventually. Ignoring the dizzy spell that washed over her, she launched herself up and collected her things.

"Sure… yeah… bye…" she mumbled out as she stood up straight again… poor choice of words right now but what fucking ever.

Taylor watched in a mixture of amusement and horror as Chloe's hand shot out from under the blankets and gave her a thumb up. As Rachel looked away to focus on the girl under her sheets, a stupid smile resting on her mouth, Taylor shuffled over to Victoria and knelt down beside her.

"Victoria…" she said, pushing her friend back and forth gently. "It's time to wake up…"

Taylor knew this would awaken the beast that was a hung over Victoria Chase, but at this point she didn't know how long before Rachel started making noises and she needed to get out of their with Victoria before it got really awkward. She didn't want to do it, but she had to risk it for both their sakes.

But something was different. Victoria usually snapped her eyes up and shot her a withering glare and a string of angry words spoken at the top of her voice. This time… she was still and at peace. The only thing that happened was Victoria raising her hand lazily to push away Taylor's hand.

"Fu…ck of…" Victoria slurred, her head rolling to rest her cheek flat on the shack floor.

Taylor tilted her head as an uneasy feeling washed over her. This was not a reaction that was typical at all.

"Victoria?" she called again. As she placed her fingers on Victoria's neck, the heat billowing off her
was unnatural.

Undeterred by Victoria's slurring's, Taylor rolled Victoria over and found her drenched in sweat, her eyes attempting to look at Taylor, but they were unfocused and dilated and blinking in quick succession. Her teeth were clenched and her right hand was gnarled up like she was attempting to. She looked like a total physically haunting wreck.

Horrified, Taylor forced herself to look up and direct her attention to Rachel and Chloe.

"I think there's something really wrong with her!" she called out to the other girls.

"Yeah she's a bitch, what's new..." Chloe muttered from under the blanket, very much distracted with the body she was toying with.

Rachel didn't even bother to look. She had good reasons to be apathetic by the looks of it. Taylor stood up properly.

"SERIOUSLY, GET THE FUCK OVER HERE AND LOOK AT HER!" Taylor screamed at the two of them.

She was done fucking around, and if she had her way, so would they.

Chloe erupted out of the blanket. Sweaty as she fixed her shirt rolled up sleeping shirt over her tits. She looked ready to kill Taylor and Victoria until she noticed Victoria lying there completely dazed and out of it. As soon as she took in Victoria at Taylor's feet, her anger melted away into shock.

"Holy shit..." Chloe breathed uncertainly. "...is she..."

As Chloe moved to Victoria, Rachel rolled over and pulled herself together. Like Chloe before her the apathy vanished. She fumbled under the blanket for a moment and rolled off the couch wearing unbuttoned short shorts. Chloe sat down next to the barely conscious Victoria, who was sort of drooling and snapped her fingers. Victoria barely acknowledged it. Like Taylor before Chloe, she weakly batted the fingers out of her face.

"Something is wrong..." Chloe announced to the others. "Rach, we need to get her to the hospital!"

"Oh, fuck that!" Rachel snapped out, startling the other two lucid girls.

"Rachel this is serious, there's something wrong with her!" Chloe argued back, her voice edged with an uncharacteristic anger directed at her girlfriend.

Rachel utterly dismissed Chloe's concerns. She redirected her eyes to Taylor. All the mysteriousness and good nature she had only known before this moment was erased. Replacing it was a rage and intensity in Rachel Amber's eyes that dwarfed anything she had ever seen from Victoria in her absolute most pissed off moments, even more fury then any male in a middle of a heated primal tirade. Rachel just looked ready to kill something.

"You only took the one capsule, right?" Rachel asked her, her hand reaching down to pat Victoria's cheek as though she was giving something for Victoria to pay attention to; to focus on instead of falling backwards into her intoxication.

As Taylor nodded, Rachel reared her hand back and slapped Victoria hard on the mouth. Taylor was about to launch herself at Rachel, but the action put Victoria in a significantly more lucid state than prior. Rachel had given Victoria something to hate, and hate had a way to put life back into someone.
"That's so fucking typical," Rachel snapped, rolling her eyes as she turned back to Chloe. "Chlo, we take her to a hospital with an apparent overdose and all three of us will kiss Blackwell goodbye, our summer plans goodbye. We're so fucking close, and I'm not fucking it up because Victoria overdid it a-fucking-gain."

"Well, what the hell do we do?" Taylor interrupted Rachel.

Slapping Victoria hard once again and getting a guttural noise from her rival, Rachel turned away and went searching for something on the cable spool turned table.

"I have an alternative…" Rachel answered as she knocked a pile of clothing off and went digging through it. "We know someone who knows some shit and knows discretion…"

Next to Taylor, Chloe looked as though she was about to have fit.

"What?" Chloe said, her eyes widened like Rachel had said something unbelievable. "No, no, no, no… You can't be fucking serious, Rach. Vicky needs a doctor, not a recovering addict!"

Rachel turned back in her hand was her phone. She joined them, standing over the two girls tending to Victoria. She jabbed her foot into Victoria's side. At this point Taylor couldn't tell if it was meant to help, or Rachel was taking some satisfaction in this. It got a weak 'bitch' from Victoria, so Taylor decided to give Rachel the benefit of the doubt.

"Chloe, Taylor we need to calm the fuck down and think this through," Rachel spoke to the two of them as though she was a mother. "She's breathing, she hasn't vomited, she isn't convulsing. She's just out of it hard. It's eight in the morning and she could have easily have taken another dose at any point last night or early this morning. Out of the three of us, the only one who will get away with it is Chase. None of us have her kind of money and this will completely fuck my Dad over. We take her to my Mom, she'll assess the situation. If we need to take her to the hospital, we will, but if she's with us it'll look better. I bet she's had to do it loads of time… does that sound like a plan?"

Taylor blinked as she looked up at Rachel curiously. What did Rachel mean by take her to her Mom?

Looking from Chloe, who seemed to be just as startled as Taylor was, she shared a look with the other girl for a moment before they turned back to look at Rachel, who seemed to come to a realization of what she had said. Exhaling, Rachel shook her head as though she dismissed it and turned back to the other girls.

"Chloe help Taylor with moving Victoria, I got to make the call…" Rachel said as she tapped her phone touchscreen.

As Rachel pressed her phone to her ear, Chloe stood up. She reached out and pulled Victoria up by her arms. Taylor helped by holding Victoria steady and watched as Chloe scooped Victoria up in her arms bridal style. Chloe emitted a small grunt, like she was startled or something by Victoria's surprisingly heavy frame.

"This is so fucking bad…" Chloe muttered as she pressed the limp girl into her chest. "Goddammit Vicky… if you fucking die on us, so be it… but if you shit yourself like you almost did last time, I am sooooo not forgiving you."

Victoria's wild eyes attempted and failed to look at the punk cradling her.

"Shut… the…puck up, funk…" Victoria managed to mumble out to Chloe.
As annoyed as Chloe was, Taylor and the older girl took a little solace that there was still some Victoria Chase inside there.

A knock on her front door made Sera jump out of her seat and nearly drop the cigarette she was smoking.

It had been about ten minutes since she got a frantic phone call from Rachel. The reception was bad. All that she could make from it was "Victoria... Drugs... I'm coming over" before the phone line went dead, leaving Sera with her heart racing in a way she hadn't felt in a very long time.

At nearly a run, she made it to the front door in record time and pried the door open. Standing there side by side was Rachel and Chloe, both of them looked like a mess; hung over did not even begin to describe them. Their hair as a sticky mess, their makeup smudged and their clothing hastily thrown over them. It did not take an expert to know what they must have been doing probably only half an hour or so prior.

"Rachel... Chloe? Are you girls okay?" Sera spoke instead of dwelling on those thoughts. "Your call made no sense..."

Rachel tried to smile, but she was clearly shaken.

"Sorry to barge in on you like this..." Rachel was the first one to speak. "It's just... we need your help on the down low..."

Rachel gestured back to the truck pulled almost clean up onto the sidewalk. Sera peered over her shoulder and noticed two figures sitting in the passenger seat. Chloe left Sera ad Rachel and walked back to the truck as the door opened. Sera watched as Chloe and one of the occupants pushed out the second into Chloe's arms.

The pieces quickly fell into place as to why Rachel and Chloe were here. The girl, about Chloe's height with a short blonde hair could barely function. Her head lolled from side to side, her eyelids flickering rapidly. She was leaned up against Chloe as the second girl climbed out. She was a leggy girl with blonde highlighted bangs and an extremely distressed expression etched into her face. Like the other girl, she had a small stumble coming out, but she was considerably more sober than the first girl. Together Chloe and the second girl walked the stoned blonde to Rachel and her.

"Sera, this is Taylor and the one hella fried is Victoria..." Rachel made the introductions.

Sera stepped out of the way and gestured to the direction of the living room. The girl called Taylor was not nearly as dumb as Sera wanted her to be. She looked from Sera to Rachel, and Sera knew that the child had already connected the dots. Rachel had probably title dropped in her panic. Whatever... they would deal with it later.

As Chloe and Taylor sat Victoria down on the couch, Sera took a seat next to the girl and carefully examined her. Like second nature... that black stain took back over like it was second instinct. For the first time in over three years, she was channelling her inner paranoid junkie. This time it was for good, which was a strange thing indeed.

"How much ecstasy did she take?" she inquired, her finger waving in front of Victoria's eyes to see if she had any sort of significant reactions. She was... there for the most part.
"She said it was straight up MDMA…" Rachel spoke to her mother, like she was in trouble. "She said one as far as I know, but that was like, 12 hours ago… she had a decent amount on hand so we don't know if she had more."

Sera sighed and looked up to the three girls watching her with baited breath.

"Well, she has popped more than that..." Sera confirmed to them, trying her best to keep her growing anger and disappointment from bubbling over. "She's not overdosing, but she's coming down really hard though…"

Sera trailed off and pressed the back of her hand on her forehead head. Victoria was hot and clammy.

"She's burning up… was this her first time using?" she asked to no one in particular.

The girl named Taylor stepped forward.

"Yes it was," she confirmed, looking extremely frightened as Sera directed her full attention to her. "She was nervous about them the entire time we heading to the party. She said it was pure grade….

Pure… that was the oldest lie in the dealer's book. A dealer rarely sold his product pure. Not when they were in it to maximize profits, like most of them were. A stimulant like MDMA didn't fuck with motor functions in the way this was Victoria, newbie or not. They didn't burn a body through a heat stroke, quite the opposite.

Sera had some theories brewing in her brain, none of them she liked.

"Where are the drugs?" Sera directed to Victoria's friend.

Ignoring Rachel's eyes widening as her junkie mom just ask for MDMA, she instead watched as Taylor dropped the purse she was holding next to Sera. Sera reached in and immediately pushed her hand into the plastic bag, pulling out a single capsule for inspection.

Sera narrowed her eyes at it as her blood ran cold. She had seen these capsules before.

She had seen them because during her early days in Arcadia Bay she ran drugs for Frank and Merrick to help pay for her stay. MDMA was never her scene… honestly she felt people who used it on a regular basis ere insufferable douchebags. But when it came to keeping herself fed and in her motel watching Rachel from afar, she swallowed her pride and helped them get their high. As soon as James helped her find stable employment, she stopped.

But was it uncut? Fuck no… Merrick cut it with an assortment of shit, and having seen the effects of GHB before used on a friend or two during her junkie days, and Chase's reaction had some of the same trademarks. A MDMA/GHB mixture was a dangerous combination, but people aware of the danger would find it created a cool effect acting as a stimulant and a depressant. Still, GHB was a delicate drug to voluntarily take… you couldn't mess around with it and take more than a few millilitres, or in this case milligram, at a time.

If Victoria Chase had taken a pill then another one, then she would be in this state for at least another 8 to 12 hours… following that she'd be needing days to recover fully from this… it was a stupid mistake on her part, and a deadly mistake on the part of who ever gave her the pills without warning her about the added ingredient.

Ignoring the urge to test drive the concoction Merrick as brewing, Sera put the pill back in the bag
"Rachel, Taylor, could you go get the bath running. Down the hallway, second door on the right," Sera addressed the girls without looking to them. "Keep the water warm but not scalding… we'll keep our eye on Victoria."

Rachel hesitated, looking from Victoria, to her mother and finally to Chloe, who nodded. Together, Rachel and Taylor left Victoria with Sera and Chloe. The two still coherent occupants in the living room remaining silent as they watched Victoria nodding in and out.

As soon as the door to the bathroom closed, Sera directed her stern gaze up to Chloe, who had become uncharacteristically petrified by the sight of Sera dropping all her niceties.

"This is why I told you not to fuck around with Bowers and Merrick," Sera addressed the frightened punk girl with as much calm as she could produce. "Now, is it safe for me to assume that you're going to tell me everything you know…right?"

Chloe nodded firmly and in unblinking silence, Sera watched her daughter's girlfriend spill her guts about absolutely everything.

Today had been an eye opening experience for Rachel when it came to Taylor Christensen. Rachel had always assumed that Taylor was just another working bee for Victoria's benefit. In comparison to Courtney, she was very pretty and quite a bit more personable, but at the end of the day she was still just another drone doing the will of Chase.

That all changed from what saw today went up and beyond a simple master serf relationship. She had managed to convince Victoria to get into the bathtub without protest, she helped her vomit when she needed to and for the past few hours she had been sitting at the side of Victoria's bed, keeping her from sleeping by reading to her and making conversation with relative ease.

Rachel hoped that Victoria was paying attention to this. What Victoria needed wasn't another drone, but a friend, her very own Chloe. Not necessarily for romantic reasons, but instead for Victoria and Taylor could have someone to confide in without fear. Victoria needed people in her life to help her understand she did not have be insular one hundred percent of the time. It was something neither she nor Chloe could be given their history, but Taylor… she had an in.

If something good came from this bad day, then Rachel sincerely hoped it was that. A silver lining was important right about now. Whatever the case was, it was decided Rachel would see about bringing Taylor into their loop as a new friend.

As Rachel glanced around the spare bedroom, a strange sort of guilt washed over her. Clearly Sera had put a lot thought into the room, making it extremely clear that she had thought she may one day get an overnight stay with her daughter. In the past two years and a month, that never happened. It only happened if they were both over at her house, but never at Sera's.

She knew it wasn't her fault; at least not at first. Dad would have had a fit in the first year, but this year was on her. Dad had eased the restrictions and she was turning 18, and seeing where Sera lived never seemed appropriate or even really crossed her mind. Now here she was, her first visit and it was only because she needed something from her. That was probably the worst part of the
guilt she felt. She didn't want her mom misconstruing this as her only being there when it was convenient for her.

Patting Taylor's knee, she stood up from her seat on the bed next to her.

"I'm going to go check on them," she told Taylor.

As Taylor smiled and nodded before turning her attention back to Victoria, Rachel glided out of the room, closing the door behind her and she silently walked towards where she heard the sound of Chloe and Mom talking. As soon as she entered the living room, the two of them went silent and looked up to her like she had been intruding on them; the two of them smoking cigarettes.

Deciding to not acknowledge their conversation she had apparently interrupted, Rachel sat down between the two of them, grabbing Chloe's pack and lighter off the couch arm and lighting a cigarette idly. She tried her best to ignore the look Sera was giving her as she took her first inhale.

"You shouldn't smoke," Sera finally murmured as she tapped her cigarette. "Neither of you girls should smoke, really."

Deciding this was a conversation that would inevitably lead to an argument, Rachel chose instead to steer around it.

"Nice spare bedroom… were you expecting company or something?" she spoke, a trace of coyness entering her words as she changed subjects.

Sera blinked and turned away. She took another inhale and held the smoke in her lungs longer than usual. Next to Rachel, Chloe took Rachel's hand, which Rachel immediately squeezed back. This Victoria business was a fucking strain to say the least.

"I had this silly idea that one day you may want to… I guess… spend the night or weekends with me," Sera admitted as the cigarette smoke rolled gently from her mouth. "That was a few weeks after we started seeing each other. As you can probably guess, I'm rather impulsive."

Rachel nodded and took a drag from her cigarette as well.

"I wish I came here under better circumstances, not just because I was making you do something for me… I'm sorry…" she apologized to her Mom. "… and I would like to do that… stay with you from time to time, I mean… after Chloe and I get back, and school starts up."

At the mention of the road trip, Sera's expression darkened. Even though her cigarette was only a quarter smoked, she stubbed it out into the ash tray and stared unnaturally hard at her daughter with a look she had only up to the is point had seen from her father.

"I have a mind to put my foot down and say no after this…" Sera admitted to the two of them.

Rachel blinked, startled by Sera's statement. She knew she opposed them leaving… but this felt different. Like she was ready to put her foot down when she had no fucking business doing so.

"I said no to the offer, Chloe too!" Rachel tore right back into her.

Sera didn't even blink.

"You said no because you had a party to run. What about next time?" Sera immediately countered. Her ability to just sit there and stare was still unnerving for Rachel to witness.
Looking to Chloe, who was silently allowing both mother and daughter their moment, Rachel clamped her mouth shut. Yes... she supposed she was very prepared to use the Molly at a later date when she didn't have any personal responsibilities weighing on her. Not that she would ever admit that. The only option she had now was silence.

She simply stared at Sera and watched as her Mom looked like she was close to having some sort of break down. This was a place that Sera probably didn't want to be back in, watching as her only daughter fell into the same sort of routine which had drawn her into. Sera's addiction traits passed down to her daughter at a genetic level.

Sera rubbed her face and shook her head.

"I'm not... trying to stand in your way. God knows I have no right to lecture you about what you put inside you," Sera spoke up after her long silence. "But I have a role in your life now. I have experiences to draw upon and I have a responsibility to keep you safe. I don't know this Victoria girl, but it could easily just be you in that stupor or... or worse... and I can't live with the thought that losing you like that was possible."

As Sera trailed off, the guilt returned back to Rachel tenfold. It became extremely evident that this had woken old wounds back into Sera's into her mind. Fifteen years... she could not even begin to imagine the amount of people who probably died in her life to this sort of shit. Going in for a high and coming out dead on the other side.

Silently, Rachel watched as Sera redirected her attention to Chloe. She smiled and reached over, patting her knee.

"That goes for you as well, Chloe..." she included. "I... love both of you so much... anyways..."

Sera lapsed back into silence and turned away, leaving both younger girls with things to ponder.

...

Victoria had no sense of what time it was, or even what day it was... she was that far fucking down the line right now.

The high was gone, in its place was just a miserable aching pain throbbing in every corner of her body. She did not know how she could endure this, but she was. She asked Taylor for some Advil but she got no commitment. Apparently they were trying to work the drugs out of her system naturally. She didn't know what the big fucking deal was, it was just Advil. They weren't the fucking ones who had ingested a couple extra Molly and fucking ended up in this mess. That was her and her alone, and it was up to the others to keep her safe from herself...

Damn... now she was in the res with people she didn't want to owe favours too...

The door opened, distracting Taylor from her read and Victoria from her festering self-pity. Victoria looked up towards it and felt a strange plummet inside her. Like her insides gave out and collapsed.

Standing there was Rachel, but not quite...

This Rachel was older by decades, and infinitely more worn down than Rachel was. Her eyes were hawkish as she looked from Taylor to the now alert Victoria. She was wearing jeans and a black
short sleeved shirt revealing an entire sleeve of tattoos. In her hands was a glass and a blender pitcher filled with an orangey liquid.

So… this was the woman who owned this place. The one who Taylor swore up and down was a blood relation of some sort to Rachel Amber. The idea that Rachel had another Mother was absurd; she thought Taylor was still stoned or something; but with the woman standing there in front of her, she could no longer deny how hauntingly similar she was to Rachel; certainly more so than Rose Amber had been.

"Taylor, the girls are making dinner breakfast. Why don't you go and help them. I'll keep an eye on her," the woman spoke, her voice was low, uncertain as she held her eyes on Victoria with an uncomfortable amount of consideration, like she was already trying to get a read.

Rose Amber was a kind woman; never in any of her interactions with Rose did she have the same sort of plotting nature which Rachel had possessed. For the longest time, Victoria figured it was a personality trait she must have inherited from a lawyer father, but looking at this woman now… she fucking knew exactly where it came from.

Taylor smiled from her place on the bed and dropped her phone next to Victoria in case she needed to use it. Patting Victoria's arm, Taylor pushed herself off the bed and left, leaving Victoria silently looking up at the woman now standing over her.

"You have a good friend in her… and I hope I'm not the only one who is thinking that…" the woman addressed her as she set the glass down on the table by the bed.

Victoria shifted uncomfortably. Taylor's loyalty to her was not lost on her… it ever was. She just wasn't very good at expressing these things. She lived in a continuous competition with everyone; even against people who she had no reason to fight. It wasn't something that she could just turn off. It was just… in her nature to be a bitch.

"I made you a recovery drink," the Rachel doppelgänger spoke again as she poured a thick gloop of liquid from the pitcher and into the glass to its brim "Blended oranges, banana, apple and squeezed lemon... I always found a super dose of vitamin C helped clear the mind, or at least eased the tension."

The woman grabbed the glass and offered it out to Victoria, who just stared at it, her mouth slightly open.

"I'm not hungry, thank you-" Victoria started.

"Sera, and yes you are," the woman named Sera interrupted her without pause. "You'll be feeling it soon, trust me you want to ride through the detox well fed… you might vomit again, but it's better to have something to throw up then stomach bile by itself."

Victoria stared up at Sera... as awful as that sounded there was a lot of merit to what she was saying. She took the glass from Sera and quietly tilted the glass into her mouth, looking away from Sera as she continued to stare at the still very stoned Chase.

"I suppose Taylor had to tell her suspicions to someone…” Sera accurately guessed.

Swallowing the last of the contents of the rather delicious concoction Sera had blended, Victoria nodded.

"I would have squeezed it out of her at some point sooner or later," Victoria muttered, devoid of any emotion as she allowed Sera to refill her glass. "We won't tell anyone if that's what you want…"
"God, I feel like fucking shit…"

For the first time, Sera allowed a ghost of a smile at the statement Victoria issued.

"Good… that means you'll survive," she pointed out to the teen. "If you didn't feel anything, you'd be in trouble…"

Victoria tilted her head slightly, her brow rose as she eyed the woman carefully.

"You sure you're Rachel's Mother?" Victoria asked her, looking away as she sipped her drink. "You're not a back talking bitch like she is."

Victoria winced. Once again she let her words escape her mind without much of a filter in place. She supposed she could have called Rachel a passive aggressive cunt, but she did not. There was indeed a filter in place. Still, she had expected the woman to probably get angry or pissy, but instead Sera merely chuckled.

"She gets that from her father," Sera spoke as she turned back to Victoria. "She got her far more insidious traits from me. Thankfully they so far have failed to manifest."

The smile that formed as she laughed slowly vanished. Her face reverted back to an expression of serious contemplation as she examined Victoria.

"If you want to use again, you tell your dealer or connection the next time you get Molly, you don't want it cut with GHB," Sera warned her, devoid of judgement or feeling. "You can have a good time high on GHB by itself, but the wrong amount and you're on a one way trip to a stomach pump or a toe tag… Do you understand?"

Victoria nodded blankly. She… she had been told by Nathan that the Molly was clean… why in the fuck did he lie to her? She gave some to Taylor; she was going to give more to Rachel and Price. She might have had her issues with those two, but she was going to give them fucking tainted drugs…

"Anyways…" Sera spoke again, breaking Victoria from her collapsing chain of thought. "Would you like to get up and try to walk around? You've been in bed for 14 hours… the girls are making something greasy to eat. Interested?"

Swallowing her growing anger with herself and Nathan, Victoria nodded and allowed herself to be helped up by the woman who was apparently Rachel's mother. There would be plenty of time to beat herself up over this later. For now she just had to focus on getting through the next day or two.

Chapter End Notes

Keep this short and sweet, Thanks for the continued support and thanks for reading!
Objective: Escape The Bay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Today was the day. She had to pinch herself on a metaphorical level, because Chloe Price could still not believe that after all this time, Rachel and she were now only a few hours away from their escape.

She supposed that they could have left at any point between when the last exam was taken and now, but they stuck to the plan. Not so much out of last days jitters, but obligation. Joyce wanted to try and spend what time she had left with Chloe as though it would somehow make up for all the time she spent with her walking vibrator. She hated it and she hated him. Moving out into the dorms was the best idea Rachel had... well... it was in the top five at least.

Rachel had her own problems. It seemed Sera was getting a little moodier. This was a woman who had shown great restraint over the past few years. For them to leave... even with all the promises they made to her... it felt like she was being abandoned again. It was a little silly, but Sera had fears were rooted in her past. She was too weak (in her mind) to have the sort of freedom Rachel yearned for. Life now had to be meticulously scheduled. The incident with fucking Clitoria Chase only served to kick Sera's fears into overdrive.

Then there was James. The past few weeks, James had seemed to force himself out of his stupor. With Rachel leaving, he seemed to be taking sort of a page out of Joyce's book and was getting steadily more hands on after countless attempts made by Rachel to get her Father feeling better. But he was not nearly as sentimental as Joyce was being about the trip. Instead of talking about the past or being sweet, he was asking for itineraries and shit. As if the girls had some sort of plan they were sticking to.

The only set in stone plan was that they would be in Seattle late July, early August to... well... shit... see Max Caulfield.

Chloe still didn't know how to feel even years after Rachel first introduced the idea to her. Angry, scared, hopeful... excited. All were valid feelings she felt about this. A part of her wanted to shout and yell at Max for leaving, that only a small part of her. Now... all she wanted to do was hug her old best friend. Nothing had to be said, there wasn't a need for an explanation or excuse or whatever... she just wanted to see her again.

Thankfully for her, helping Rachel through her own loss had given Chloe the opportunity to supress and force her own feelings back down so that it wasn't something which she dwelled on. While she didn't mind having something to focus on, Rachel genuinely hated that and made it known every time the topic was even breached. She was always trying to get Chloe to open up. She used to wonder if it was out of annoyance of having Chloe up in her shit as much as she was, but a three hour screaming match an age ago had cured that insecurity. Chloe was in it for Rachel, and Rachel was in it for her... all the way.
While it was sort of... embarrassing to drag up the past when Rachel had so much more shit to deal with, it was nice to know that she cared, even if Dad died and Max left such a long time ago. It made her feel love and protected by Rachel.

Rocking her body gently until she could prop her on an elbow; Chloe sort of brought her body to an upright position and had managed not to disturb Rachel who was still fast asleep. Her arm was draped around Chloe's body, her face unceremoniously planted into her chest, which was pretty much standard operating procedure for her. In silence, Chloe held herself over Rachel and carefully brushed the hair from out of her eyes.

A few hours to go now and soon the two of them would finally blow out of town and take their first steps out into the wider world waiting for them. Holy shit... it was actually happening now.

A small moan caught Chloe's attention. Rachel was stirring back to consciousness, or least was close to. It was... honestly adorable. It was sort of like watching a kitten struggle to wake up after a particularly long and comfy nap. She made all the cute noises and everything. There was a crazy idea planted in Chloe's head to use 'Kitten' as a pet name, but strangely enough Cats or Dog person was never brought up in all their time together. Perhaps it would be a wedge apart. Man's Best Friend versus... well... a cat.

Chloe, as if it needed to be said, was defiantly a dog person.

"What are you doing?" she heard Rachel murmur into her, her words vibrating into her skin.

Still stroking her fingers through Rachel's hair, Chloe shrugged, watching as Rachel moved along with her.

"Admiring the gorgeous girl in my bed," was Chloe's answer, feeling sort of fucking suave right about now.

"That's pretty self-absorbed of you..." Rachel shot back mildly.

As Chloe's face heated up at the implication Rachel had made about her being gorgeous washed over her senses, Rachel pushed herself up a sleepy grin resting on her mouth. With the two of them at eye level, Rachel quirked her lips and leaned in, pressing her mouth against Chloe's before she pulled back and sat up properly, leaving Chloe slightly dazed as she watched Rachel push herself clean out of bed.

"And where are you going this early in the morning?" Chloe managed to get out without stuttering as Rachel pushed back her hair and pulled on a pair of Chloe's boxers underneath a long sleeping shirt Rachel had conned off of Chloe.

Chloe scrunched her nose slightly as she continued to stare. For a girl with her sort of personal and family wealth, Rachel sure did jack a lot of free shit from the poor girl. Not that Chloe minded too much... it always seemed to look better on her.

"If you really need to know, I got to pee, Price... God, perv much?" Rachel replied as she turned back to face Chloe, still walking backwards towards the door.

Chloe could only grin as she checked the time. It was about nine and Joyce would be up making breakfast... If Rachel was going to be up... she might as well make herself be useful. That was what good girlfriends did right? She just had to say it the right way to get what she wanted.

"Dude, could you like bring us up some breakfast so we can eat and pack shit?" she blurted out.
Okay… so that could have gone better. She would have to chalk this up on the sight of Rachel standing there in a thin shirt… her clothing. Even now, it still broke her brain at the sight of the gorgeous girl so... dedicated to her.

Rachel's hand resting on her hips as she eyed Chloe like she was an insect. When Rachel broke out her arrogance, it was like… the hottest fucking thing ever; because at the end of the day the arrogant girl got fucked to jelly by poor old her.

"Dude?" Rachel repeated, switching to a dudebro tone as she added. "No problem, brah, anything else you want, how bout good old fashion gal pal head! No homo though…"

Rolling her eyes, Chloe stood up on her bed, only to fall to her knees. She knelt in front of Rachel, her hands raised in front of her like a prayer.

"Honey bunny, love of my life, my guiding star…” Chloe sappily pleaded to her, her eyes as wide and as innocent as she could make them. "Could you pwetty please get us some fuckin' grub…"

Rachel stared at her a little longer before she looked satisfied with the sight of Chloe on her knees. She nodded to her, her expression smug as she silently decided that was the right tone for her girlfriend to take.

"Wash your hands will you?" Chloe called after her.

Rachel did not turn back; she raised a middle finger at Chloe. It was arguably her favourite finger Rachel possessed. It just had a little more reach then the index…

"I will, thank you for the reminder!" Rachel replied haughtily. "Shower more than once a week, will you? One of these days I want to be able to take you out somewhere nice and not have to wonder if you're going to get us busted for smelling like a grow op!"

As Rachel left the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her, Chloe collapsed back onto the bed into the spot here Rachel had been sleeping, a stupid silly smile forming onto her face.

Fuck, she loved that girl… This summer was going to be their best one yet.

...

...

Stepping down the final steps, Rachel allowed herself to be washed over the familiar and wonderful scent of Joyce's traditional breakfast. It would definitely be one of the few things she would miss when Chloe ad her left.

They would be taking off from here in only a few hours from now. They would finish their packing and loading their shit into the truck and would wait on Dad and Sera to show up before they left. Thankfully for Chloe, she would only have Joyce seeing her off. David was already out of town, running himself through a security course so that he was a proper guard when it was time for school in the fault.

Fuck… Madsen was actually going to be at their school next year…

Rachel had to hand it to her. If she was in Chloe's position she would probably never even attempt to help him out. That was even after disregarding his part to play in what had happened to Mom. He was an abusive relic of a bygone era, someone who just needed to assert himself in a leadership
role in a family that wasn't his place to take. Even if he had a full time job, that role would remain firmly in Joyce's hands, as it should be.

As she entered the kitchen, she found Joyce standing there, mixing a bowl of pancake batter. She looked up as soon as Rachel approached her, a strained sort of smile crossing over her lips. It was an expression she had gotten used to, but it was obvious that Joyce was not particularly okay with her.

That was not to say Joyce was not a nice woman - far from it in fact. Joyce was nice and very kind, but there was an underlining distance between Rachel and her. It went beyond the obvious marrying David Madsen. It was sort of like she didn't think Chloe should be so close to her. She doubted it was homophobia thing and more 'not good for my daughter' thing. Apparently the goodwill she felt for James Amber did not extend to his daughter.

Perhaps she thought it was all just a fling, that it was just simple teenaged love or something. Perhaps she just thought it was a phase for Rachel… something that would inevitably lead to Chloe getting hurt or rejected. When Chloe came out, she came out in typical Chloe fashion: hard and in your face. Perhaps Joyce thought that Rachel being less abrasive meant she wasn't committed enough…

Whatever, she could believe whatever she wanted. Rachel loved Chloe Price, and Joyce would just have to fucking deal with it.

For now, she was not about to voice anything and create a bad send off for her Chloe. This was a matter to be addressed once they got back, once the two of them got their breather from Arcadia Bay life. For now she would just grin and bear the uncomfortable tension between the two of them.

"Good morning, Joyce," Rachel greeted the mother with a smile.

"Good morning Rachel, did you sleep well?" Joyce replied gently, her voice startling bright in spite of Rachel's doubts.

Rachel shrugged and stepped towards her.

"Plenty of time for that, I suppose," Joyce pressed on as she poured out the first batch of batter into the hot pan. "I imagine you're too excited to sleep… you and Chloe both… I guess that this has been your girl's big goal… leaving everyone behind to explore."

Rachel looked on Joyce curiously. It seemed as though both she and Sera were doing more than working together. They seemed to be sharing notes on their displeasure of both Chloe and hers imminent departure. Unlike Sera, however, Joyce didn't have nearly the amount of baggage which Sera had to deal with. Sera could only dance until she eventually accidentally on purpose broached the topic she really wanted to discus. Joyce on the other hand could more or less cut through to the heart.

"We'll be back, but I won't deny that were excited." Rachel replied as leaned against the counter next to her. "We're definitely going to miss your breakfasts, though… we've been practicing, but we'll never quite reach the standards we're used to."

Joyce arched her brow for a moment before she murmured "flatterer" and flipped the first pancakes over. As she did so, she slowly exhaled, her amusement vanishing from view. The two of them remained in silence as Rachel wished she could have had something else to say.

"You know after all this time, we never really had a lot of time to just sit down and get to know
each other…” Joyce said as she turned away from the stove and rested next to Rachel. "After what happened… I can imagine you have come up with a lot of reasons why to explain why you and I never seemed to click."

Joyce gripped the counter behind her. She looked extremely off. Like she was realizing Chloe’s absence was now locked on course and standing next to her was the reason why this was so.

"You have a lot of influence over my daughter, Rachel," Joyce pressed on. Her tired old observation making Rachel's blood run cold. "You might not mean to do it, but that influence is still yours to manage. God knows you have all the reason sin the world to hate David. Chloe… loves you, and your feelings have a way to wash off onto others. The people who you care for… she cares for… the people you hate…well…"

Joyce trailed off as she looked at Rachel properly and must have immediately noticed that the good mood Rachel was in no longer existed. If it was anyone else making this tired argument to her, she would be liable to lose her cool. First it was Eliot, then Victoria, and now Chloe's own mother… all to support fucking David.

Of course this was what it was… Joyce was insecure as hell about her marriage, especially when she had to look into the eyes of someone irreversibly affected by one of Madsen's fuck ups just about every day, whether it was Chloe for failing to protect her, or Rachel for… well…

"You got my hatred for David Madsen all wrong," she said as she idly picked at one of the pancakes already stacked. "I don't hate David for his role. He's not worth my effort. I just feel absolutely nothing for him. Chloe has her own reasons to hate David. After a few years of him treating her like some sort of problem he can solve by shouting at it, should you really be that surprised why she hates him?"

Chewing the piece of fluffy pancakey goodness between her fingers, Rachel swallowed and sort of smiled a humourlessly thin smile.

"That's why I hate him," she said, staring off ahead of her, unable and unwilling to look at the mother next to her. "I hate him for the way he treats Chloe… I hate him for everything I've seen from him... how could I not hate him for that?"

Rachel glanced back to Joyce, who looked weary. It was a hard thing for her to have to listen to, but it was absolutely necessary. Chloe wasn't one to admit these things and David absolutely was not about to talk about the fact that he spent years verbally abusing her. Rachel decided to show a little mercy and not say that everything she knew, her Dad knew as well, and James Amber was by far a better Dad to Chloe than David could ever dream to be.

"And sure, maybe I do influence Chloe in some ways… " she added on, her words strained at her acknowledgement. "But it's a mutual thing… sort of comes with the whole dating thing, I guess…”

As Joyce nodded, Rachel turned away and listened as the coffee peculated in the machine. Running her hand through her tangled hair, she tried her best not to look at the woman who was watching her.

"This trip wasn't about me… it never was. It's for her," she continued, her voice drained of feeling anything to off put any risk of tearing up in front of Joyce as she added. "It was for her to see there is something more out there than just this. It's to help her find peace with everything in her past. Chloe has been stuck in a nightmarish limbo state for so long. If it wasn't for what happened to Mom, we'd have done it sooner. Chloe has so much pain in her, and if I can help her let go of some of it... it…”
Rachel's words died out as she felt a weird sort of embarrassment wash over her. Perhaps she had blurted a little too much out. She didn't like a lot of people muddling into her thought process. There was only one person she usually allowed in.

As Rachel turned back to Joyce, she found her looking at younger girl curiously. It was far less distant… in a way that was sort of as though she was seeing Rachel for the first time. That couldn't have been far from the truth if she was being honest. Mom died and a lot of Rachel's niceties and charm sort of vanished overnight.

Perhaps this was all a part of the healing process...

"If you don't like me, that's fine… I get it," she pressed on, a small urgency in her tone. "But I think you like my Dad enough to be a friend. So I want to ask you to… well… I guess I would like it if you could talk to him over the summer. I already asked Sera to look out for him while I'm gone, but… you've been in his position before. You know the sort of feelings he going through, just as Chloe knows how I feel."

Rachel winced at the request she had suddenly made. It was very spur of the moment; but as she stood there with Joyce, it because so clear at how much Joyce could do to help her Dad. Sera was great and Rachel had really come to... well... love her. However in spite of that feeling, there were places Rachel feared for Sera to approach simply because of the accumulation of years of horror stories her biological mother had been forced to tell her at Rachel's insistence.

Sera had a self-described self-destructive personality. Diving too fast and too deep into the grief which a man she once love had might do harm to her far greater than the help she could give him. It was a balancing act and it was this reason which made Rachel the most leery to leave each other in only their company. With Rachel in their lives, they had a common goal towards good relations. What if something set them off and she wasn't there to keep them from going back to war against each other. Sera spoke often of ending the conflict, but she also admitted to poor impulse control. How long would it be until that happened and escalated Dad's grief into anger?

This was what made Joyce such an important new factor. Joyce's presence in this could be the new sort of peace maker or filter for both of them. She was friends with both of them by the looks of it. Sera for sure at least, and at the very least she had a certain amount of pride for helping her out of a tight spot. If there was one thing a Price woman did, it was hold onto their pride stubbornly.

"I've always wanted to talk to him about it…" Joyce admitted to her. "…but with everything that happened…"

Rachel shook her head. She reached out and grabbed onto Joyce's arm.

"No, my Dad never blamed you or even David for that matter," she reassured Joyce with a slight smile. "He's kind of a by the law sort of guy when it comes to what happened. The dipshit who pulled the trigger is who he blames. He'll probably be a dick about it at first… but you just tell him I sent you and he'll know better than to dismiss you-"

Without warning, Joyce enveloped Rachel into a crushing and overwhelming hug. In these display of affection, Rachel had learned just where Chloe's crushing hugs seemed to have come from. She followed her standard procedure operating and relaxed herself, moulding herself inside of Joyce's grasp. Like daughter before her, the move seemed to work on Joyce.

"I never… I never had a problem with you, Rachel…" Joyce spoke over Rachel's head in a soft, vulnerable tone which surprised Rachel by its sheer earnestness. "When you two get back, I would like to get to know you for real… just the two of us if that is something you'd like."
That was actually something she would have liked.

As Rachel nodded into Joyce, Joyce pulled back, her hands still on Rachel's shoulder. She was smiling again, and this time, it appeared much more genuine.

"I'll try to talk to him... but I can't promise you results," she murmured back to her. "But I want you to do something for me as well. You watch out for my little girl, okay? Make sure she doesn't do anything overtly wild... please?"

There it was again... the same sort of mannerisms Sera had. 'Go out and enjoy yourself, but don't get too wild...' like they were too untrustworthy or something. Still... the incident with Victoria had sort of tempered the two of them. Perhaps Mom and Joyce made a little sense about being guarded.

"Joyce, I love your daughter. I will *always* protect her," she reassured Joyce solemnly.

Rachel had meant every word she had said. Chloe was her number one priority over everything else in this world. It was as that old song went: nothing compared to her.

Joyce let go of Rachel's shoulders and stepped back. After a moment of deliberation, she nodded, accepting the answer. Perhaps for the first time she was seeing what Chloe saw in her. If that was the case, then it was certainly a good start to the next phase of their relationship.

...

...

It was around noon before Dad and Sera had shown up to the Price-Madsen residence. Both Chloe and Rachel were in the process of packing in their last bags before they noticed the two of them in conversation with Joyce who until up until their arrival had been helping them.

The three of them conversed quietly to each other. Joyce had watery eyes and Sera seemed stone faced, as was Dad, but for another reason altogether although the sentiments remained the same. Both of them feared to be unrepressed. Emotions made everything complicated, but her Dad was not about to renege on their deal. He knew better than that. As for Sera, her reasons were long since obvious. Of the two, she was much more resigned to everything being well out of her control.

As the two girls finished tying their shit own in the truck bed, they clambered over the sides of their truck and squeezing each other's hands, Chloe and Rachel separated, both of them splitting up to face their respective parents. Rachel could not help but watch in amusement as Chloe went red in the face again as Joyce swallowed her baby up in one of her crushing embraces as she issued a laundry list of demands from her child to follow.

Rachel turned back to find that her father still hadn't moved... which was typical she supposed. Next to him was Sera who was significantly warmer compared to him, but she was still not sold on the trip. Rachel didn't really care though that she felt that way. She was just happy that Sera did not make do on her small threat to report what had happened at Rachloefest to Dad. She was just happy Sera was here to see them off.

"Hey Dad, hey Sera," Rachel greeted the two of them as sweetly as she could manage as she approached them. She watched – a little surprised – as Dad smiled for her.

"Well now, *Sunshine*... here we are," Dad was the first to reply. "Are you nervous?"
Ignoring the urge to squirm at his nickname for her, Rachel shrugged idly, hoping to be as casual as she could about her nervousness. For years she had wanted this, but only now was she feeling the overwhelming pressure that was leaving everyone in her life behind to venture out into the waiting world.

"Only a little, to be honest; I'm more... I guess jittery..." Rachel admitted to him, returning his smile with one of her own. "Thanks for agreeing to this... I know that I can be awful, but you still put up with it..."

Dad shrugged his shoulders.

"Well it's all part of the job..." Dad returned, his words tainted with amusement as he dropped his hand on her shoulder. "...and I'm still expecting for you to have to experience this trouble yourself... the two of you can decide how to go about it."

His glance flickered to Chloe and instantly Rachel's face went red at the implication. Chloe and her as parents... the poor world would never be able to handle that. Not that she particularly cared what the world thought ever. Maybe it was something... if they survived their teens and early twenties... it would be something to consider...

Sera stepped forward; it was only now that Rachel had noticed the large bag in her hand. It was a large blue bag with a Red Cross mark on it. Rachel looked up from the first aid kit ad back to Sera, who smiled nervously, as though she feared that Rachel would hate her for what she was giving her.

"I got you a little something..." Sera explained, her words very shy as she held the bag out. "I figured since you don't like hospitals... it might be good to be prepared..."

Rachel narrowed her eyes at Sera in protest, her eyes flickering towards her father in fear that he already knew about what had happened. Although he looked curious, it seemed as that that wasn't the case. For her part, Sera seemed apologetic for slipping that last line out.

"I'm sorry; I was trying to lighten the mood," Sera said as she took Rachel's hand. "I have reservations, but I trust you enough that should something happen, you will do the right thing... we both trust you, right?"

Next to Sera, Dad nodded at the last remark and the weird little Amber and Gearhardt family watched as Chloe and Joyce joined the three of them. Joyce had an arm around an obviously flustered Chloe, she was red eyed and teary as it was clear that Joyce was not handling this departure well at all.

"Hello Joyce... you're looking how I'm feeling..." Dad greeted Joyce before directing his full attention to Chloe and added. "Chloe, I am expecting you to take care of Rachel. Rachel, the same goes for Chloe as well, alright?"

As both girls nodded at Dad's words, another round of hugs came in hard from Joyce and Sera. As they pulled back, Dad stepped forward and wrapped his arms around his daughter only for a moment before pulling back and placing himself in front of Joyce and Sera. It was a move to give Chloe and Rachel a chance to step back and move to the truck without having to drag their respective Mom's all the way. Still Joyce and Sera said their goodbyes and offering reminders, which they did their best to placate even as Rachel clambered into the passenger seat and Chloe into the driver's.

As Chloe slammed the door shut behind her, she immediately ignited the engine. She looked a
little dazed and twitchy, like she couldn't believe this was actually happening. Rachel was no better than she was right now. She leaned over Chloe and rolled the window down.

"See you later! We'll see you in September, and we'll keep in touch!" Rachel promised them, unable to contain her giddy excitement now. She waved and watched as Chloe looked at the three of them.

"Don't call us, we'll call you!" she added as she pulled back the clutch and shifted into drive.

Giving their parent's one final wave, the girls pulled out of the driveway and into the street. Destination: Anywhere but Arcadia Bay. As Rachel slid into the seat right next to Chloe, Chloe turned back to face Rachel. The tension and the nerves had been broken in her. All that was left was pure elation.

"Holy shit, Rach…" she giggled nervously. "We're actually fucking leaving…"

Rachel could not help but laugh lightly as well, Chloe's grin was contagious and too cute to not leave unrewarded. As they reached their first stop sign, Rachel pressed her finger into Chloe's chin and turned her girlfriend's head to face her properly. She leaned in, kissing Chloe softly.

"That we are, Chloe…" Rachel confirmed, as she pulled her lips back. "I think this is the start of something unforgettable…"

It was a cheesy line perhaps, but fuck it. It was all that her brain could come up with right now.

As they kissed again, the car behind them honked its horn, breaking their concentration on each other. The two of them laughed and directed their full attention back to the road. Rachel's hand rested on Chloe's lap, watching as Chloe focused her attention on getting the two of them out of town as soon as they could.

While it was probably wiser to save their celebrations until after they were far enough from Arcadia Bay for it to mean something, but either of them could not deny relishing in their first steps towards full independence.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY GIRLS! Only took you two a couple years to make good on your escape.

As always, thank you for your continued support. It means a lot to find out others are emotionally invested in this story. It's always humbling to hear that. I know that some of you expect this story to be pure fluff, but there will be dry spots where Rachel and Chloe being disgustingly cute has to take a back seat.

This trip will not be one of those dry spots at all.

Thanks again!
Ignoring the stares of a mother and her daughter watching the blue haired girl pushing her shopping cart along, Chloe tossed in a two boxes of double stuffed Oreos to help them through their inevitable smoke session into the cart; adding to the pile of supplies which now covered the cart’s occupant, Rachel Amber's legs.

Chloe hunched back over the cart and stared at her girl. Rachel was currently resting with her back turned in the direction of which Chloe was pushing. She was wearing aviators and licking a lollipop idly as she held on her phone which was locked on Google Maps just not giving a single solitary fuck what anyone thought of her.

In spite of her raging hangover, Rachel she wore a smile on her face which she was currently directing at the little cutie clinging onto the hand of her mother and was probably wondering why someone on the verge of legal adulthood was riding in a place a kid usually did. If she was being honest, Chloe was wondering that as well. Chloe was arguably still drunk from last night. Why did Rachel get the free ride?! Kind of annoyed at being a pack mule, Chloe glanced at the woman looking curiously at Rachel and then to Chloe. As though she was attempting to decipher them and exactly they were. "Is there something the matter, ma'am?" Chloe asked her, her voice biting. "My daughter has a rare disease; you ever see that Robin Williams movie "Jack"? Kind of like that except she's not cute."

Rachel looked away from the child and turned her attention to her girlfriend. "That's so rude! I am so cute!" she pouted, playing along with Chloe's little game, like they were indeed mother and daughter.

Chloe grinned… okay… maybe she was pretty cute. That was beside the point… maybe.

While the two of them laughed the woman did not seem amused, she reached out and grabbed her daughter's hand and picked up the pace, leaving Chloe and Rachel in the dust. The little girl looked back and waved Rachel's smile widened and she waved goodbye as well before she raised her phone again.

Eight days into their journey and they had made it to Port Orford, and it was about this time that the two of them had realized much of America would be like this; Small towns doting the major populace centres. This seemed especially the case in the Pacific Northwest. Chloe was in favour of picking up the pace. Head north to Portland, chill out in civilization, take in a concert; find the two of them tattooists who wouldn't give them a sanitation disease or something.

Rachel, on the other hand, really seemed to have taken to this on the open road mentality which they had discussed for so long. That was not to say she didn't want to head south to Cali (Chloe felt the same), or to Seattle to meddle around in Chloe's relations (Chloe was a little more reluctant for that) but the idea of the two of them alone on the open road, camping and roaming through the wilds of the Pacific Northwest had a charm which the nightlife of the cities could never hope to achieve.
Still… there were some annoyances. People in these small towns seemed to always be watching them. She suspected it was the same in Arcadia Bay, but that was home grounds and the two of them together was something the locals more or less got used to. Perhaps it was as Rachel said: "They never were graced with two girls as hot as them around."

"Holy shit..." Chloe spoke as she swerved Rachel and the cart around the corner and ignored a couple more stares. "I think we found an even smaller Arcadia Bay..."

Rachel pulled her lollipop from her lips, her mouth curved into a smile as she showed the screen of her phone to Chloe. If she was excited, then that meant Rachel was about to drop a left field suggestion to Chloe and at this point Chloe knew better than to stand against it.

"I had this crazy idea, and feel free to tell me to shut up; but what if we headed inland?" Rachel suggested to Chloe, her voice high and excited. "I always wanted to see the desert. We could totally head east for Alvord Desert for a day or two and check it out."

Chloe arched her brow at her girlfriend. Who in the hell ever wanted to go to the desert of all places? God, it sounded awful. Give her Arcadia Bay any day of the week.

Still, the expression of hopeful urgency on Rachel's face was hard to avoid for very long. It was pretty much inevitable that she'd get what she desired.

"Whatever happened to finding a different beach to walk along every day?" Chloe asked her as she leaned forward over the cart.

Rachel carefully shifted her weight; pushing aside some of the bags of bread and other provisions so that she could lean up and press her lips against Chloe's. Unlike Chloe, she was far less bothered by the stares of the random people she was being pushed by.

"Alvord desert is practically one giant beach..." Rachel pleased as she pulled her mouth back from Chloe's. "Pretty please can we go... for me?"

Rolling her eyes as Rachel used the magic phrase 'for me' on her so blatantly, Chloe nodded and watched as Rachel slumped back into her original seat, giving a victorious fist pump. Years into them being together and Rachel still took the time to celebrate all her victories.

"Dude, you're the one financing this trip," Chloe reminded Rachel of their unspoken wealth gap. "I'm basically just the chauffeur, bodyguard and sex toy here."

Rolling her eyes, Rachel turned herself around and pressed her back into the cart seat. Her hand reached up behind her and rested on the Chloe's. The disparity of wealth was still a bit of a sticking point for them.

"And you're doing a fine job on all three accounts..." Rachel reassured her softly, her fingers dancing along the joints in Chloe's hand. "...now if you learned how to cook..."

Chloe abruptly stopped the cart and started walking again almost immediately, watching as Rachel yelped and nearly fell forward. She turned back, her eyes flashing white hot with rage.

"Hey fuck you, Chloe Elizabeth Price!" Rachel snarled in spite of the stupid goofy grin she wore. "No, I won't fuck you if you keep putting that domestic shit on me, Rachel Dawn Amber!" Chloe growled right back.

The two girls held their stare as that familiar warm feeling bubbled inside of Chloe. Rachel nodded,
there was a knowing smile as though she too understood exactly what Chloe was feeling. With the two of them in unspoken agreement of where they had to take this, Chloe directed her attention to getting to the cashier as soon as possible. They had some serious tension they needed to bang out as soon as humanly possible

...
the photograph on the wall was all she was focused on. She tried to maintain that illusion, but she failed because every time she tried to, the gentle fragrance of lavender caught her attention and inevitably made her look at the girl.

Fashion-wise, she was very plain looking. She wore a simple grey jacket, a button down blue and black checker shirt and black tight jeans and Converse oxfords. She sort of gave Victoria a weird hipster vibe, like fashion meant nothing to her. Under any other circumstances she dismissed the hipster lifestyle as tacky and formulaic… but this time the lack of proper fashion only bothered Victoria for one reason alone.

It only served to conceal the stunning beauty she had possessed. Victoria looked past the outer layer and found herself looking at the girl behind the layers of poor people clothing.

Her neck length chestnut hair was tied back, but her bangs breezed freely over her eyes. She had luscious lips and a field of fucking stunningly adorable running from cheek to cheek. Her make-up use was limited to a little eyeliner, which only served to accentuate her gentle doe eyes. On her lips wore an expression of sorrow for the picture… she was an empathetic soul by the looks of it, finding pity in a decade old photo as though it was happening before her eyes.

For a moment – only for a brief moment – Victoria Chase had felt herself _unworthy_ to speak to a pure being like this one. Her heart slowed down, giving off these paining throbbing beats, the likes of which she had never felt before. She tried to experience youthful attractions to…well… the proper gender… but it never seemed to take hold. It was sort of like she was going through the motions.

Never before had she felt this sick and scared to speak to a complete stranger… She was usually much more confident, but standing here next to the short teenager as she desperately fought against the unnatural feelings she was having had altered it altogether.

That unnatural feeling wasn't solely based on gender. It did play a role in why she felt so strange, but it was just falling heads over heels for someone Period. It was a feeling she never really believed in. It felt like a cliché. It was something that certain other Queens of Blackwell did. They fucking leaped in heads first into declarations of feelings for each other long before they actually really got to know each other.

It was mushy fucking garbage and Victoria had sworn she would never be so pathetic that she would allow a rando to have that much fucking sway over her. Yet still here she was. She was still very much intrigued and very much wanting to push her luck.

In spite of her nerves, in spite of her growing desire to run the other direction and pretend this angelic girl in flannel and out of fashion jeans didn't exist, Victoria had to know more. She was Victoria Maribeth Chase, standing in her parent's gallery. This Hipster girl was on her domain, and as such Victoria had every right to speak to her!

So that was exactly what Victoria did.

"Like this place? I _own_ it," she blurted out in a snottily boisterous tone before she could even filter her words.

She couldn't _fucking_ believe that she had just said that. It had to be a nightmare because Victoria Chase didn't just blurt shit out like that like she had no cool. Sometimes she flaunted her money, but that was primarily a school thing and usually was to assert her power, but she was alone now on her home territory, and had just done it to a random pretty girl she was totally not into right now.
As Victoria stood there, she watched in horror as the girl blinked, breaking her attention from the photo and directed her full attention to Victoria. She did not seem impressed; if anything she looked like that was the last thing cared about, but was too polite to justifiably tell Victoria to fuck right off.

God where the fuck was Chloe Price when she actually needed her… She'd probably beat Victoria up for the girl.

"…Okay…” the girl said to Victoria, her sweet tone strained as she looked at Victoria like she had lost her goddamn mind. "That's… good to know… I guess."

The girl turned away from her and Victoria mentally screamed at herself for her behaviour; yet, while the girl had turned away, she did not move, and there was a strange expression which had crossed over her face. It left Victoria even more curious because it seemed as though she was amused by Victoria's foul up much more than she was offended.

Perhaps... perhaps the girl was offering her a second chance… and that amused expression she wore… it was a minor victory in itself.

So with that in mind, Victoria recollected herself, reorganized her approach and steadied her breath. She felt unbelievably stupid right now. God it would be so much easier to go back into her total bitch mode.

"I'm… sorry about that… total bitch thing to say, I guess," Victoria restarted with as smooth an apology as she could relay. "That was… not a good first impression. My name is Victoria Chase."

Victoria watched as the girl turned back to face her again. This time Victoria got to properly see the other girl. She inspected Victoria, taking in the sight of the obviously discomforted girl standing across from her.

"Victoria Chase?" the girl greeted, her tone nearly gasping. "You mean as in the Chase Space? The place you bragged about owning like twenty seconds ago?"

Wide eyed at the sarcasm used against her, Victoria and stared at the other girl, her humiliation bubbling up to the surface. Her hands formed fists as she wanted to do nothing more than to storm off and hide somewhere until August and/or drink until she forget that any of this had happened at all.

That was when the girl broke down into a small laugh. She… wasn't being serious… at least she hoped that was going on; the way the girl carried herself, like she was genuinely amused was enough to relax Victoria enough.

Like the girl opposite of her, Victoria allowed a small laugh and a smile to escape. If she was being honest, she could understand why it must have been amusing. It was sort of an insane choice of words which only deserved nothing but their combined mocking.

As the two of them lapsed back into a now strangely comfortable silence, the smiled properly and tentatively offered her hand out. It was visibly shaking. It was as though it was a confirmation to Victoria that the nerves she felt were not just completely hers alone.

"My name is Max Caulfield," she introduced herself…

Max. Her name was Max.

Was it short for something? If it was short for Maxine then Victoria just had to know why she
would short such a beautiful name into something so simple and masculine when in spite of her attempts at the contrary, she was a gorgeous feminine girl. Victoria fought against the heat rising to her face. She was gushing… God she hoped it wasn't so fucking obvious.

A surge of self-doubt washed over her as reality set back in. If even one of her friends was here, she would probably tear her down and just like that, Max and she would never reach this point. Fuck… if Max Caulfield knew even a tenth of her real personality, she would up and leave. None of this was right, so why did she continue?

Well… she had a reason… she just wasn't sure if she was ready to process it for serious deliberation… for now… no one in her life outside of her parents were with her physically, and she would only be here for another month and two days. What exactly was the harm to try something new like make a friend without any sort of expectations which all of her previous friendships minus Nathan seemed to have been.

Realizing Max's hand was still offered out to her; Victoria immediately reached out and took it as gently as she could. She was smaller, and seemed a little more… frail. She was delicate, like a songbird. She took note of it for the future.

"I'm Victoria…Chase…" she started before remembering she had already made her introductions moments prior.

Max nodded sympathetically, as though she was humoring a stupid person. Apparently because she was humoring a stupid person.

"Yeah…" she said slowly. "You made kind of a big deal about it. I promise I remembered."

Realizing she was slipping, Victoria quickly found her foot as Max stared at her, obviously amused again by this.

"You're a photographer, right?" Victoria decided to inquire. "Most people walk in and take in the images with stupid, glazed over look, or turn into a pseudo-intellectual trying to impress the people they came with. You haven't moved from this picture in twenty minutes."

Victoria watched as Max made an expression that was clearly confused. She crossed her arms over her chest, her head tilting to one side.

"…And how would you know that?" she asked Victoria curiously.

Thankfully for Victoria, she was spared an explanation as Max relaxed her stance and nodded.

"But yes, you're right…" Max confirmed lightly. She paused and rubbed her neck as she added. "Well, I wouldn't say I'm a photographer per say… I guess that I'm aspiring to be one…"

Victoria nodded curtly as her lips curved up. Her hand reached into her purse as she attempted to push back the urge to compete and show off the best that she could. She would not revert into competitive Victoria so quickly. Still, a little show of her shots wouldn't hurt… So long as Max agreed to getting completely shown up.

Yes, she wanted to try to do this different than most, but she couldn't just shut herself entirely down to impress a girl she was totally not interested in, in any way beyond their shared passions in photography.

"I totally get that. Do you have any work with you?" Victoria spoke as she waved her phone back and forth in front of Max, "It be kinda cool to sit down and talk shop with someone on the same
Victoria's initial enthusiasm dried up as soon as she saw the hesitation in Max. She seemed almost like that was the last thing she wanted to do. It was a stupid idea, and Victoria had been far too forward, far too fast.

"I would like that..." Max said slowly as she spoke before Victoria could rescind the offer. "But I... well; it's just that I do my work with a Polaroid Camera, which means all my work is at home. I guess I just like working with something physical, over the digital domain... I'm not meaning offense or anything. I've seen some very beautiful work with digital, and I would like to see what you have... and I'm rambling."

As Max went silent, all Victoria could do was blink. She dressed bad and she had a love for using antiquated technology for her work... It seemed as though her initial appraisal was correct. Victoria felt a small grin formed unconsciously as she noticed the shorter girl grow a little more nervous.

"Holy fuck, you're a total Hipster..." Victoria teased the girl as gently as she could.

Victoria watched as the girl in front of her got flustered Her freckled cheeks tingling a soft pink as she looked like she was about to get a little angry. As Max looked from side to side, her hand pushing a loose strain of hair behind her ear, she turned back to Victoria and shrugged.

"Yeah... I guess I am..." Max resignedly acknowledged the taller girl's observation. "Does that mean we're not going to talk now?"

Victoria smiled and shook her head. She might have been a hipster, but her erratically pounding heart was pretty much screaming at her to overlook this small detriment. She ignored the voice in her brain this time; it told her that she was making a huge mistake...

Perhaps... slipping up from time to time was okay...

"I frequent this coffee shop a couple blocks from here," Victoria said as she gestured to exit. "Would you like to-"

"Yes... I mean, I wouldn't mind seeing your work, if you don't mind..." Max interjected, nodding her head as though she needed to issue a confirmation.

Victoria put her phone away and silently, she and her new acquaintance headed for the exit. Victoria in a daze and Max Caulfield looking a little surprised by the looks of it...

Hopefully it was a good sort of surprise.

...

...

It was late afternoon before the two of them were in solid enough condition to make their way through Paradise Point State park towards the beach.

With Chloe looking for somewhere to change or something, it was left up to Rachel to pack all their shit down to the beach and start the small beach fire she was in the process of making. She didn't mind doing it, Chloe did a lot of the heavy lifting and it was only right that she took some responsibility as well.
As she fed the fire and took in the warm looking Pacific Ocean, Rachel's mind could not help but wander back home. Dad seemed to be respecting her wishes of radio silence, but then again that was how he was anyways even before Mom died. Sera, on the other hand, was quite content with blowing up her phone with texts every so often. Rachel was lenient and kept her up to date.

In all likelihood, Sera was not the only one asking these questions. Joyce undoubtedly had found a way to reach Chloe without reaching her directly. Chloe more or less disabled her phone and was completely off the grid. Rachel had to hand it to her; it was obvious that Chloe was trying to make this trip 110 percent about the two of them.

It was this sort of dedication that... well... it did things to Rachel. It put thoughts into her head that she had been toying with for a couple months now. As silly as it sounded, two years in and what they had together... it felt far and away from the teenage romance most people around them seemed to label it. Why was it really so bad to feel like that there was something more to this?

Chloe was 18... she was nearly 18... She knew for a fact that people intertwined their lives at even younger ages in years past. Why was it so bad to think about it nowadays? She heard the rumours around school about them... was it really so taboo?

With her thoughts drifting towards her true feelings, she looked up and noticed Chloe was walking off of the sandy path leading back to the parking lot and towards her. She was wearing a large black *Ministry* tee. One shoulder was riding low revealing a blue bikini strap. Rachel had fully expected her to be wearing jeans, but instead like Rachel she was wearing black short shorts, which sort of gave the impression she was using the Ministry shirt as a dress.

Rachel bit her lip for a moment before she gave her a wolf whistle. Chloe was going to look fucking killer when she got her ink.

"Goddamn Price, you're pale as fuck!" Rachel observed loudly. "That's it, you're wearing short at every opportunity. I want to see those legs every day!"

Rachel smirked as she watched Chloe's movements grow bashful. Even from where she sat, she could see her cheeks go a little red. The nearest people were hundred yards away yet still Chloe ducked her head and trudged over to her girlfriend, slamming herself down onto the blanket next to her.

"I'd rather they'd be for your eyes only..." she grumbled out, her hand unconsciously touching against her exposed legs.

"Oblige me," Rachel requested, as she eyed her. "I just want to flaunt my girl off...I think I would be flattered."

Faking a yawn, Rachel stretched her arm out and lazily dragged it around Chloe's shoulder as she watched the small fire crackling and dancing in front of the couple. From the corner of her eye, Rachel took in the relaxed smile that formed for Chloe.

"You'd think I get bored of this... but I like this, Rach," Chloe admitted to her.

Rachel knew how she felt. It was not far removed from their home, but Arcadia Bay was haunted for them. The sort of warmth they may have felt for the Bay was tainted by the memories they had gathered over the years.

"Must be the company, I guess," Rachel said with a shrug as she looked out on the ocean again. "I can't think of anyone else I'd like to share this with..."
The words hung between them as Chloe and Rachel lapsed into silence. She did not look as Chloe took her forearm and squeezed it. She did look; however, as fingers not belonging to her gently stroked her scar tissue covered wrist. She looked at Chloe properly and found her gazing back.

Smiling faintly, Rachel leaned in and kissed her. As she deepened the embrace, Rachel slid up until she was sitting properly in her Chloe's lap.

"So, random as fuck question, but there was this rumour going around about us… that we were going to get married this summer…" Rachel spoke up as she pulled her mouth back. "You didn't start it, did you?"

Through her hooded eyes, she watched Chloe widen her eyes at the question. She opened her mouth and closed it several times as she seemed to struggle to find the right thing to say. Rachel already knew where that Blackwell rumour came from, but she might as well use it to open the dialog.

When it came to love, all weapons had to be used. Their survival depended on it.

"No… but why, is that too presumptuous?" Chloe finally managed to form a coherent thought into words. "Or… are we too cool for that?"

Longingly staring at the girl underneath her, Rachel shook her head. No, they certainly weren't too cool to not make that sort of life commitment.

"I'd be upset if you didn't ask me first…" she easily teased Chloe, draping her free arm around Chloe's neck now.

The reaction which Rachel got from Chloe was not exactly the reaction she had wanted. She watched Chloe, her heart dropping to the pit of her stomach as Chloe laughed off the idea like it was all a big joke. She supposed she could not blame her. It was a pretty random thing to bring up, but that didn't just settle the small part of her that was a little outraged that someone whom she loved—unconditionally loved—had brushed off a not so crazy idea as a crazy idea.

"Chloe I'm being serious, what if we do it?" Rachel demanded, failing to keep the anger growing in her voice in check. "I turn 18 in two weeks. What if we got married for fucking real this summer? Would you do that?"

The humour Chloe had for the idea died right in front of Rachel. She looked at Rachel as though seeing her in a new light. It was a strange expression. It was sort of as if she wanted it, but was too frightened to take Rachel's declarations at face value.

Rachel supposed she could not blame her. She made a lot of declarations in the past; but none of them made her feel like this one.

"We still have school," Chloe attempted to rationalize. "You don't think it's weird at all to be talking about this?"

"We've been seeing each other for two years - longer than a lot of couples who get married," Rachel immediately pointed out to Chloe. "My Dad and Sera got married at 18. Your parents got married hella young too. When exactly did this become such a weird fucking thing?"

Chloe just sort of stared at her like she was trying to process this still. It was obvious that the idea Rachel had planted in her head was already starting to blossom.

"That early marriage didn't turn out well for your parents," Chloe faintly reminded her. "…and I'm
fairly certain he'd kill me if we came back hitched."

Rachel rolled her eyes. If anything Dad would be the first one in her corner.

"But we're different then Dad and Sera. We are so much better for each other than they were," Rachel nearly cried out in her growing frustration. "We've seen their mistakes and we're not going to repeat them… are you really this against us taking us to another level?"

That was a cheap shot, Chloe know that and Rachel definitely knew it. This just… she just thought it was the kick in the ass she needed, even if Chloe was being the obviously rational one about this.

Without warning, Rachel found herself lying flat on the blanket with Chloe now dominant over her. As Chloe pinned her arms over her head, Rachel unconsciously interlaced her legs around Chloe's.

"I'm not against any of this, Rach," Chloe spoke down on her, her voice earnest as she held her lips inched from Rachel's. "If there is one person who I can imagine I'd like to spend the rest of my life with it's you… It's just… I hate to be seen as a cliché high school sweetheart's thing."

Rachel tilted her head against the light blanket, her senses overloaded by the familiar pressure building inside her as Chloe's sharp blue eyes pierced through hers. It was time to put the cards down on the table. Irrational as it might have seemed, it was still a feeling she had to get out.

"You are Chloe Fucking Price, babe. You giving a shit about what other people think goes against everything you are," Rachel reminded her. "Fuck what everyone else thinks. I fucking love you and you should fucking marry me when I turn 18, and we'll spend the rest of our lives officially doing cool shit like this together."

Chloe leaned down and shut Rachel up with a kiss. It lasted just long enough to cease her ramblings. She pulled back, her fingers gently grazing her cheek.

"I'm not… saying no to you, but I don't have a passport for a run to Canada, and a marriage won't be legal in Washington State until Decemberish or something," Chloe stated to her. "Can you… like… cool your panties down? I know I'm prime real estate but goddamn."

Rachel blinked; and just like that reality had hit her.

As odd as it might have seemed, Rachel had never really subscribed to the notion of being in a gay relationship. For her, it was much simpler: She was in love with Chloe end of discussion. But marriage was a label, and that inevitably led her back to gay. Her desire to want to marry Chloe added a new dimension of complication. It wasn't legal in Oregon, it wasn't legal in California, and it was not ratified into law for Washington State beyond a civil partnership.

Rachel emitted a soft sigh and turned her head to one side. God damn… this really kinda sucked… She wasn't exactly used to being fucking excluding from things.

"Fair enough, I suppose. It was a stupid idea anyways" she murmured, attempting to hide her simmering disappointment. She breathed out hard and put as much warmth as she could onto her face.

"You're not mad?" Chloe asked her, a little startled by Rachel's ability to turn off her excitement for something so quickly.

Rachel shook her head. A little disappointed, but no she was not mad. Chloe was her guiding light, her steady grip on reality. So long as Chloe wanted to be her wife, she would be fine whenever it happened.
"Nah…” Rachel reassured her with a small grin. "Now you have plenty of time to work on your proposal. If I'm not crying, then I'm going to make you wait a whole three minutes before I say yes…”

Rachel planted a kiss on the corner of Chloe's mouth and broke herself out of her grasp. She stripped out of her shirt and bolted towards the beach with Chloe following after her as she struggled to take her long ass shirt off her body.

Enough of the future planning, it was just time to have a little fun.

Chapter End Notes

It FINALLY happened. It won't be an easy road. Not everyone can wear their hearts on the sleeves like Rachel and Chloe can, but hey it's the summer of young love. Anything is possible.

Anyways, thanks as usual for your continued support to my work. I'm always glad to hear from you all. I'll see you all soon.
Stepping off the bus that had taking her to Discovery Park, Max Caulfield slung her pack over her shoulder and waited until the bus had sped off before she sprinted across the road, dodging oncoming cars Frogger style. She probably should have walked the ten yards to the crosswalk, but whatever, it was over now.

Recollecting herself from her death-defying feat of agility, Max walked at a striding pace. She was about twenty minutes late and from everything she had gathered from her brief interactions; Victoria Chase was an extremely particular girl about common courtesy things like arriving on time. She'd probably overlook this, but Max would make sure to do better from now on.

Victoria was…well… she was easily the closest thing to a perfection Max had ever encountered in her short life, and just more beautiful than Max ever could dream of being. She had these hauntingly sharp green eyes that could act as a force multiplier to her words. She was several inches taller than Max (then again who wasn't?) She had an athletic physique, yet she seemed to show little interest in the subject.

Then again how would she know Victoria was not into athletics?

Max had only known her for about thirty odd hours and this was their second physical encounter; but in that time, it seemed as though all the two of them did was text each other. Sometimes it was serious questions, meaningful learning about each other, but mostly the two of them just chatted about whatever they were doing. One driving the conversation, the other inserting a joke or thick sarcasm and it would turn Max into a laughing mess.

It had been a while since she had a taste of this… not since… well… Chloe.

Max exhaled unsteadily as she forced the guilt of her thought for her old friend back into the depth of her mind.

As for Victoria, no one should have been such a perfect mixture of snarky, awkward, snobbish, sweet and earnest as Victoria was. To say it had left Max a little shaken up was an understatement.

The fact of the matter was she didn't exactly know how to define this strange little feeling brewing somewhere deep in her, but it was something she supposed was to be expected she felt for a boy she liked or something. She had an idea what it was, but she was far too frightened to voice it, let alone act on it. She wasn't like that… she assumed.

Okay, so maybe it went beyond a feeling. Perhaps Max might have been a little… smitten by Victoria Chase.

It was an old fashion choice of words, but it didn't diminish the strange feeling she got as she watched Victoria spend an hour talking about Richard Avedon's work with Gia Carangi and her failed 1982 photo sessions with detail she never knew existed. The way she could seamlessly segue between her topics and anecdotes and then change course to her personal life was astounding in the level of confidence and grace she had after her initial social fumbling. If Victoria and she remained friends, she hoped some of that confidence rubbed off on her. Maybe not the snobbery though. That
Max could do without. She simply didn't have the money to back up that state of mind.

The grace and the intelligence was something which Victoria strived to have at about the same level as her ambition, but with her ambition the cracks in her image of perfection became all the more apparent. As Max looked at the pictures, Victoria maintained a running commentary on her work. Nearly of it extremely critical, like everything she did was not at a professional level. Max had to pause a few times to remind Victoria that in spite of her beautiful amateur work, Victoria was still just that an amateur like her and that the two of them would need a great deal more time before they could achieve any measure of serious professional success.

That seemed to work to relax Victoria, or at least Victoria had decided to shut up and let Max examine her digital gallery.

From what she saw in her, Victoria was sort of a machine in her work. She preferred in the moment work opposed to using models. They captured the life of Seattle and wherever else she shot, but there as a strange sort of coldness to her work. That was not to say her work wasn't beautiful, because it was. On a technical level Victoria dwarfed her. But that coldness… it felt as though Victoria was holding back. Like she feared investing a piece of herself into the work she took.

With that in mind, here they were now at Discovery Park for a photo session. Victoria wanted to something more downtown, financial district oriented. She wanted to capture the collapse of relaxed Seattle life in favour of the city's growing corporatism. Max wanted to go into the suburban jungles, taking candid work of life in suburbia. After two hours of arguing, the two of them settled on urban wildlife.

Honestly it was a little nice… perhaps even thrilling to have someone actively challenge her. It had amped her expectations of a photo session significantly having someone who not only had the shared interest (her friend Kristen had sort of a fleeting interest) but was actively pursuing a career just like she was. It had all the markings of a rivalry minus the bad blood. Perhaps as this friendship grew they would be able to push each other to get better and better.

For now, however, they would have to focus on the personal side. If they jumped into the deep end… well, it probably cause a strain before their relationship was solidified enough to withstand it. She would probably have to explicitly point this out to Victoria. Max doubted very much that Victoria eased into anything in her life.

There sitting on the hood of a Mercedes C-Class sedan which Dad would probably murder Mom and her to have was Victoria Chase, leaned back. She was clearly bored as she scrolled through her phone with one hand and a cigarette in the other. She was apparently waiting for her. Max watched in silence as the wind ran through Bangs pixie cut, billowing her side swept bangs gently. She was not at all dressed for outdoors in a park.

Honestly Max doubted Victoria had ever been out in nature at all. She was wearing a black skirt and tights with a light white knit and dotted undershirt. She looked like she was dressed for a gallery opening. She was dressed in a similar fashion on the day they met, but Max had assumed that was just for then. Apparently Victoria liked to dress a decade or two older then she actually was.

… Not that Max minded… she looked… well, stunning.

Without Victoria Chase noticing, Max raised her camera and took a photo of the girl. She gave it a good shake and hid the polaroid in her bag. Ignoring the small bundle of nerves forcing her to remain locked in place, Max exhaled and stepped forward towards Victoria. She would be cool and
collected. As charming as Victoria was the other day. Victoria Chase wasn't the only one who could be cool.

"Hey Victoria!" she blurted out, waving her hand wildly as she instantly regretting just how stupid she must have looked.

Victoria looked up from her phone. She thankfully had missed Max's… well… Maximum Dork Mode and issued the red tinted girl a small, almost predatory grin.

"Hello Max," she said as she pushed herself off her car, her phone returning back to her purse. "Did you have trouble getting here?"

Her tone was not judgemental or upset, but there was a question Victoria definitely wanted to have answered after being stood up for nearly an hour. Sighing, Max joined Victoria, who immediately flicked her pretty much unsmoked cigarette to the ground and stamped on it as though she feared Max's judgement, or perhaps (off chance) the health of Max's lungs.

"Yeah" Max sighed as she stood next to the tall girl who was tilting her head down on her. "… I missed the bus so I got delayed, I'm sorry about that."

Victoria blinked once, her brow arching as she seemed unable to process the idea of having to use public transportation. Max had her licence, but Mom and Dad weren't exactly okay with her using their cars whenever she liked. So it was bus life for her.

"It's fine, Max," Victoria dismissed with a wave of her hand. Max watched as a small frown formed on Victoria's mouth as she gestured to the car.

"You know you can call me up or whatever when we got plans to chill. I have a car; and there is this great new invention; it's called a passenger seat," Victoria added, her voice now growing a little shriller. "You see, having a passenger seat means I am able to carry more than just myself in it… like, I don't know… perhaps a hipster who would rather get shuttled around in a stinking bus packed full of people and make a trip that takes five minutes last forty-five minutes."

Not exactly sure where the biting sarcasm ended and the humour began; all Max could tell for certain was that the small smile Victoria had held no resentment. It was just Victoria breaking her metaphorical balls.

"Yeah… I guess I could," Max shrugged casually, deciding not to let Victoria go unchallenged. "It's just I wouldn't want to cause you any sort of inconvenience. Rich girls have such busy lives; what with you owning an entire gallery all by yourself and all."

Max's heart skipped as she watched Victoria flush pink at the mention of her fumble the other day. She watched –silently celebrating her small victory - as the tall blonde crossed her arms over her chest and lightly tapped her foot on the pavement.

The embarrassment vanished off Victoria face. She uncrossed her arms and stepped closer to Max, and she only stopped moving until she was well within Max's personal space. She reached out, gently touching Max's forearm as her smile returned. There was something different this time and Max wasn't entirely sure that she liked it.

"If we're going to be friends, you've got to be comfortable asking things from me," Victoria informed her in a low, breathy voice. "… Because I promise you, I'll be undoubtedly asking things from you…"

As the two of them stood there, Max willed herself not to turn away from the extremely confident
platinum blonde whom had effectively cowed her into a state of shocked silence. Her bright emerald eyes gleamed as Victoria refused to blink.

"... And exactly what would you like from me?" Max had to ask her, unable to hide the small tremble building in her voice as an alien sort of feeling washed over her and lead her to thoughts which Max never had before.

On the surface, Victoria appeared to be unmoved by her question, but the hand that still gripped her forearm told a different story. It tightened a little and she could feel a faint shake being transferred into her body from Victoria. As Victoria bit her lip slightly, she leaned in closer.

"Your portfolio for starters," Victoria reminded her finally, her eye brows raised as she nodded to Max's shoulder bag. "I showed you mine, it's time you stop holding out, Max."

Max blinked as Victoria released her grasp on Max's arm and the tension in her chest relaxed somewhat.

"Oh... right," Max mumbled as she reached into her bag and desperately tried to push aside the thought that had stormed into the forefront of her mind. "It's nothing special; I think I have a ways to go-"

Victoria snatched the portfolio from out of Max's hands before Max could finish dismissing them on the spot and walked back to her car. She once again sat down on the hood and gingerly opened the folder.

As Victoria's amused expression died and an expression of thought inspection took over, Victoria patted the hood of her car next to her without looking up to Max so that Max wasn't standing there on ceremony for her. Swallowing her growing fears she stepped forward and took a seat next to Victoria.

In silence she waited for Victoria's judgment. She fought ever urge to be like Victoria was prior overly self-critical. Instead she locked her mouth shut and decided that she would just let Victoria examine her work without the critiques which might influence her as Victoria had tried before. She was just an amateur after all. If she was willing to dish out that advice to Victoria, then she had to follow it as well.

"This is..." Victoria spoke suddenly, looking up to Max finally. "Max. You got the gift. Don't you ever... ever fucking squander this talent."

Max blinked and looked for any sort of deception on Victoria's part. She could have easily been humouring her. If she had been, she probably would have taken the platitudes regardless; but instead there was a genuine honesty in her eyes which Max could not help but trust.

The honesty Victoria radiated was not necessarily a warm reception. Instead it was envy, and perhaps even a little jealousy. Why Victoria felt that, she was not sure. They had none of the technical prowess she had. For Max it always felt like trial and error and a hell of a lot of luck. Victoria and her might have been blossoming friends; but that wasn't about to stop Victoria from feeling like she had to filter her agitation.

If anything that was the last thing Max had wanted.

If Victoria felt this way, the last thing she wanted was it to be supressed. Suppression inevitably led to resentment... and since meeting Victoria Chase, the last thing Max wanted was to ruin this friendship simply to feel safe from Victoria's inevitable desire to one up her. As Victoria closed the
portfolio and handed it back with a smile returning to her face, it seemed as though the envy had passed.

"I'll take a closer inspection later," she said as she slid off the car hood and turned around. "Come on I need to see you in action, even if you use dead technology like the hipster trash you are…"

Max remained on the hood and silently gave Victoria a sharp look. She watched, her heart rising inside her chest as Victoria's small smirk formed into a widened smile as she extended her hand out to Max. Max exhaled and took the hand felt the strong grip of Chase yank her clean off the car and right into her, staggering both girls and making them laugh.

They stood there; hands still latched to each other and allowed their laughter to die between them, leaving Max grinning and Victoria strangely nervous, perhaps even regretful for her semi-insult.

"Totally teasing, I promise…" Victoria breathed down to her.

Immediately accepting the apology which Victoria did not need to issue her, Max nodded, gently relaxing her hand enough so that she could slip out of Victoria's grasp. There was a flash of strange hurt, or disappointment that crossed onto Victoria's face, but she immediately squashed.

Max was grateful for that. This entire encounter with Victoria so far was starting to eat away at everything she had ever known. While it was thrilling and awesome, the last thing she needed right now was to have some weird identity crisis right here and now.

"Come on," Max spoke up to her new photographer partner as she cleared her throat. "We got work to do, right?"

Seeming to be just as grateful for this escape as she was, Victoria nodded blankly and together the two of them headed towards the nearest trail. The two of them came to a non-verbal agreement to attempt not to making this session anymore thrillingly awkward than it already was.

Wowsers, they were going to fail hard at that promise.

...

...

Driving through the Seattle suburbs gave her time to think. That time to think had helped her come to a conclusion. Victoria Chase might not have believed in a God, but she knew for a fact that Max Caulfield was the fucking devil.

Max had the raw talent, the looks and could drive Victoria to the fucking brim of babbling like an idiot with just one word. *Fuck*, just one *look*. Yet unlike others approaching her, she didn't seem to abuse it or use it to her advantage. She just kept her nose down in her work and everyday life without using it to advance any sort of personal agenda beyond her long term goal of making a career out of her photography work.

Max was not a very technical artist. In fact quite a bit of her work was hit and miss; but what she hit… it was like she had captured perfection in a single photo; but even in Max's worst work, there was more life and earnestness than anything Victoria could dream of having.

Yet, while she might have envied the ability Max shown, Victoria didn't hate it. She didn't fear it or even want to destroy Max so she came out on top out of the two of them.
Instead, she wanted to nurture it… to help Max hone that raw talent into something perfect.

For the past day and a half, there had been words spoken… or rather texted to her years ago that Victoria had tried her hardest to forget which had bubbled back up into her thoughts. Words that destroyed her when she was younger because it was something she had doubted she would ever find, but two years later and here she was driving the silent Max Caulfield to her home, her heart swimming in her chest at the merest glance to Max and fucking Rachel Amber's prophetic text barrage haunting her thoughts.

‘One day I hope that you find a friend like I found one in Chloe. Someone who doesn't take you and your rising alpha bitch status at face value, someone you can be vulnerable with and know that your deepest fears can be safe with someone else so you don't have to feel so alone all the time.’

Was this what Rachel had meant? Was what was going on with Max and her that similar to that of how Rachel and Chloe felt for each other? With Max she felt safe to just be herself… whatever that was. She had spent so long living an image that not even the occasional time with Chloe and Rachel could separate the real Victoria from the image. Yet here she was, unafraid to be herself with Max, yet completely terrified by this sway Max clearly had no idea she held over the Chase girl.

"We're here, you can park behind them if you would like."

Max's gentle words broke her out of her musings. She looked to Max briefly before she examined the house Max was pointing to. Max was by no means a poor hipster girl. It was a nice modern two story home, with a cherry red Dodge Ram and a blue Kia Optima in the driveway.

As Victoria put her Mercedes in neutral, she leaned back into her seat and turned to face Max. There was a small smile resting on her lips. She seemed to be lost in her thoughts as she held those gentle doe eyes on Victoria's. She looked so serene in the fading sunlight hitting through the windows and illuminating her chestnut hair to almost an auburn colour.

Exhaling, Victoria could not help but return her smile with one of her own. She did not know how she could make her feel this giddy, but Victoria was not about to question it now.

"Today was a lot of fun, Max," Victoria spoke first, deciding to be honest rather than guarded. "Keep this up and I may have to drag you out more often. At least until you get bored."

Max shook her head, her lips still curved as her hand grasped onto her shoulder bag. There seemed to be a sudden bout of nervous energy that hit her. Fuck… it really hit the two of them if Victoria was being honest.

"I'm getting to do something I love with someone who shares the passion," Max returned after a moment in a shy tone. "I'll never get bored of this… or you…"

Max fell silent, giving the two of them a moment to stew once again in their strange vibes. After a second or two longer, Max, unfastened her seatbelt and opened the door. Instead of stepping out of the car, Max instead paused and turned back to look at Victoria, a curious sort of smile returning to her face as she seemed to inspect the blonde.

"I was thinking… Would you like to stay for dinner?" Max invited, her voice slightly edged to convey her sincere interest.

Victoria pursed her lips together. It was tempting; it meant she would get more time with Max, and with her Europe trip inching closer and closer, she was starting to see the ramifications of having started a summer… friendship when she only had one month window for it.
"I… I wouldn't want to impose-" Victoria started. She was silenced by Max. With a small smirk she leaned forward and pressed her hand against Victoria's mouth.

"Victoria, If we're going to be friends, you've got to be comfortable asking things from me, because I promise you, I'll be undoubtedly asking things from you." Max said back, throwing Victoria's words tight back into her face.

Max withdrew her hand. She looked close to having a fit of laughter at her expense. Victoria rolled her eyes as she attempted to reorganize what was left of her dignity.

"Fuck it," Victoria sighed as she pulled the keys from the ignition. "Well, lead on Hipster Trash."

"As you say, Ritchie Vic," Max called back as she stepped out of the car.

Victoria lingered for a moment before she too stepped out of the car and slammed the door shut behind her as she followed Max up the driveway towards the house. Right now she was just hoping to God that fucking nickname Max had just used would not stick.

Before the two of them could reach the front door, it opened, startling Victoria. She watched as out stepped huge man built like a football player closed the door behind him. His hair was buzzed short but compensating was the huge Hipsterish beard covering much of his face. Like Father, like Daughter Victoria supposed.

As the approached the two of them, Victoria could see that Max's Father had giving her those kind eyes Victoria had come to sort of admire. She watched as Max's face lit up as her Dad approached them. Victoria on the other hand felt herself nervous in a way she had never felt before.

She suppressed her fear and watched as the man gave Max a side hug.

"Hello Maxine," he greeted his daughter as he let her go. "You're just in time. I was about to send out the police for you."

As Max rolled her eyes, Victoria could not help but smile. So, Max was really a Maxine all along. She fucking knew it.

"Jeepers, you're funny for an old guy," Max said in faux annoyance. She turned back to Victoria and with a smile, she added. "Dad, this is my new friend Victoria Chase. Victoria, this is my Dad."

As Mr. Caulfield directed his full attention to Victoria, the nervous instinct brewing inside of the Chase increased. Victoria smothered her fear and offered her hand out to the father of her new friend as well as a smile that took more effort than she thought it would take.

"Hello Mr. Caulfield, it's a pleasure to meet you," Victoria greeted Max's bemused father. She watched as Mr. Caulfield took a single striding step forward towards her.

"Please call me Ryan, and Maxine's mother, Vanessa," the man named Ryan requested as he shook her hand. "Dad, this is my new friend Victoria Chase. Victoria, this is my Dad."

As Mr. Caulfield directed his full attention to Victoria, the nervous instinct brewing inside of the Chase increased. Victoria smothered her fear and offered her hand out to the father of her new friend as well as a smile that took more effort than she thought it would take.

"Hello Mr. Caulfield, it's a pleasure to meet you," Victoria greeted Max's bemused father. She watched as Mr. Caulfield took a single striding step forward towards her.

"Please call me Ryan, and Maxine's mother, Vanessa," the man named Ryan requested as he shook her hand. "It's nice to finally meet you as well. Max here has been gushing over you at least a day now."

Letting go of Ryan's hand, a much more confident feeling took root inside of Victoria. She turned and found Max looking up at her Dad as though she had been fundamentally betrayed by him. Ryan, on the other hand, was completely disconcerted by the reaction he had gotten.

Victoria decided she could play with this. She crossed her arms over her chest.
"She has?" she echoed as she turned back to stare at the suddenly bashful Max once again. "This is an interesting turn of events."

Across from her, Ryan laughed. It seemed as though he was ready to play along with her in making poor Max squirm. She may have only known Ryan Caulfield for about 45 seconds, but she liked him already.

"It is, isn't it?" Ryan played along with her. "Anyways, I'm grilling tonight; I gotta run to the store for some Kaiser rolls because someone who will remain nameless and certainly not your mother forgot to go… be back in ten."

As Max nodded, Ryan pecked the top of Max's head and with a smile for Victoria, he stepped by the two of them, leaving the pair of back in a state of awkward nervous energy. The two of them remained this way until Max's Dad had pulled his Ram out of the driveway. As soon as he did, Max reached out and rubbed her neck.

"Is it too late to rescind my asking you in for dinner?" Max asked Victoria, her voice attempting to achieve some measure of casualness.

Victoria smirked properly and shook her head.

"Totally too late now, Maxine…" Victoria teased her, just having to twist the knife in Max. She watched curiously as Max winced like the name was some sort of burden.

"Ughhh… My Dad and Mom are usually the only ones to use my full name. I don't like it very much," she admitted distasteful at even the thought of her own name. "It just feels so… I don't know… prissy or something…"

Victoria shook her head. Sure, Max was entitled to have an opinion, but so was she and Max not embracing her name felt so wrong to her.

"That's too bad," Victoria quietly murmured back to Max. "Honestly, I think that Maxine is such a beautiful name. I think that it could definitely suit you."

Victoria went silent as she watched Max shift in place as she seemed to contemplate what she had said. She held her soft eyes on Victoria's as though she was digging in deep to find any sort of deception or lie. She would not find one. Maxine was a beautiful name and Victoria thought that Max deserved the proper recognition.

Running her hand over her face, Max slowly nodded.

"Well I still prefer Max," Max murmured lowly as she looked back to Victoria properly. "But I… suppose I would not mind it terribly if you wanted to use Maxine if you would like…"

As their eyes locked on to one another, Victoria nodded blankly and allowed herself to be led up to the front door by Max… Maxine. This was an offer she was not about to pass up.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you don't mind. I've been wanting to bang out a pure Maximum Victory chapter.
God knows they need one after the wait. Next chapter we'll have more pairings to pay with. Thank you as always for the support and I'll see you all soon!

PS I know shit all about photography. Basically sorry if I butcher it and sorry if I barely acknowledge it.
For the first time in her life, Sera Gearhardt had voluntarily walked into a Justice Department building without being dragged in by cops.

To say that this was well outside of her comfort zone was an understatement. Last time she in a place like this, she had been picked up for a possession charge and got put on a 14 month probation sentence. She had to manually remind herself that she was not in trouble as she approached a cop for directions and the cop only smiled and helped her instead of giving her the third degree. She wasn't quite the stringy skeleton of a junkie anymore. She could now more or less fit in with normal society, even if it felt so weird to do so.

Being here, surrounded by lawyers and cops was not exactly her ideal place to meet James Amber, but it was the only option she seemed to have right now. She didn't want to disturb him on his time off, he did not answer her calls, and so she texted Rachel about what she should do. The message she got back was short and completely devious.

Nothing backs my Dad into a corner quicker than approaching him at work.

As much as Sera did not want to put James on the spot, she still had made a promise to her daughter that she would try to pull him from out of his self-imposed hell. She did not know if she was the right person for the job, but she had to at least crack the door open.

If James let his guard down just enough, she could lure him into a situation where she could involve Joyce, who Rachel had also apparently asked for help from. For about a few hours or so, Sera had felt a small jealousy towards Chloe's mother; how dare that Rachel had asked Joyce to help. It felt that perhaps Rachel hadn't trusted her as much as she had thought. However after a bit of time to contemplate, she understood why Rachel did it. Joyce and James had a very similar situation, and Rachel was not proud enough to ignore another resource to help him through his grief.

So with that in mind, Sera was ready to work with Joyce, contrite for her unfounded assumptions.

She paused her walking as she noticed James Amber – District Attorney emblazed on a solid looking oak door and approached it, ignoring the two cops sitting on a bench outside, drinking coffee and glancing up at her. She exhaled and knocked on the door for a moment.

"Enter!" she heard James brisk voice boom from inside the office.

As the cops looked away from her as they too heard James Amber, Sera opened to the door to the office and stepped inside. Ignoring the small rumble inside of her, Sera looked at James sitting on the couch, working on a laptop. He looked beaten down, like he had been at work overnight. She doubted very much that Arcadia Bay and the surrounding region were in need of its district attorney that much, so it had to be him.

As she nearly glided towards his desk, James looked up and shut his laptop. He looked rather startled or weary perhaps at the sight of her standing in his office, examining a family photo he had of Rachel when she was about 13ish if she used her own collection of Rachel photos as a point of
"Sera," he said behind her, his words struggling to remain level. "You look… grown up."

A smile formed privately on her face at the observation. Yes, she supposed she had forgone her standard t-shirt and jeans or summer dress, replacing it with a light grey wool knit sleeved dress which covered her body art nicely. Still clutching Rachel's photo, Sera turned back and immediately noticed that James Amber, a man who had spent years hating her and two years carefully holding her at an arms-length out of suspicion had been checking her out.

She did not know exactly what to make of it. Perhaps she was just making an assumption. She was in a foreign environment and was with a man who was in a tangible position of power over her. Perhaps she was overvaluing her attractiveness. Still… the thought of James looking at her in any way other than a pest had left her feeling… thrown out of a comfort zone.

In her mind, it was far easier to live with his mistrust then it was with this lurking… old feeling that the two of them had long thought was dead and buried; because as she set the photo of a smiling tiny teen Rachel back down on the desk and looked at James, whatever it was he was feeling as he looked at her had popped up in her and it scared the ever loving hell out of her already.

"Thank you, I guess…" Sera murmured as she pushed all the fear that she had out of her voice and stepped towards him slowly. "I figured I should dress up if I was coming to a government building not in handcuffs…"

That was meant to be a joke – an admittedly awful one – but a joke nonetheless. James, however, was not laughing. He looked far too worn out to do anything so basic. So there he sat, looking up at Sera like he was staring at a pest which he did not know whether to exterminate or embrace. Sera watched as James visibly swallowed before he gestured to the spot on the couch next to him.

Sera obliged her ex and sat down on the edge of the couch. She straightened out her hem briefly before she crossed one leg over the other. She allowed James a slight smile as she watched put the laptop on the table next to his couch and turned back to face her.

That old familiar coldness was back; but it was not directed at her. It was just how he looked at others these days. Everyone was subject to his careful scrutiny. If he had his way, he would never let his guard down again, which was an insane way to live and coming from the likes of her, that must have said something.

"What are you doing here, exactly?" James asked her, his eyes searching her face as though he was worried. "Is everything okay?"

Sera nodded quickly and ignored the small flutter in her at the concern he had unexpectedly displayed. It was sort of like a crack through his defenses which she got to see the man she once loved, the man she had come to befriend again in the month that led up to the loss of Rose Amber.

She missed it, and she would relish ever second she got to see it.

"Yes everything is fine, James," she gently reassured the father of her daughter. "I just… thought I would come and see if you were busy."

James quirked his mouth upwards as he examined her.

"I'm at work, I think it should be obvious," was his curt reply. He exhaled and as he rested his arm on the couch arm, he sort of smiled as he added. "Well… out with it then, what's the latest word from Rachel and Chloe?"
Sera shifted uncomfortably in her seat at his question. Under any other circumstances she would be happy to switch the course of the conversation to their one constant connection, but that was before she got the call from Rachel this morning.

Usually Rachel texted to her updates on the trips rather than get hanged up in phone conversations which every party involved knew Sera would attempt to drag out as long as she could just to hear her voice. So whenever Rachel called Sera, she just knew that those girls were up to something. After what the two girls had told her what they planned to do and advice they attempted to get from her. Well… it was so much more then she had expected.

"They are heading to Alvord Desert for a couple of days," Sera informed James slowly. "Rachel… may have been asking me if I knew anything about Peyote. Apparently they are interested in the full desert experience."

Judging from the horror that spread over James' face, her attempt to ease him into the knowledge did not exactly work as she had wanted. To be fair, it wasn't far from the reaction she had when she first heard their plans.

"What did you say about it?" he breathed.

Sera bit back the small annoyance that crossed into her feelings. She shrugged and pushed herself back into the couch.

"This might come as a surprise, but I'm not nearly the one woman narcotic playbook you two make me out to be," she snapped back, unable to hold back her bristling anger for much longer. "All I told them was not to go in it with a bad vibe, and that's only because you took me to see Young Guns when we were still just babies!"

Sera went silent and the two parents of the fledgling pyschonaut stared at each other as the absurdity that Sera would recall that date from 1988 so unexpected seemed to simmer some of the anger that was brewing in James. It was obvious he hated the idea of Rachel doing something as mind bending as messing around with hallucinogenic plants… but what could he exactly do? By the time she got home, Rachel would be an adult. Free to do as she pleased.

Sera exhaled. Perhaps it would just be the one time. Although this couple with the whole Victoria Chase incident three weeks ago and the dalliances between Rachel and drugs – whether intention or not – was an uncomfortable thing to think about. All that she could do was trust in her judgement… and trust that Chloe Price would do the right thing.

Ext to her, James loosened his tie and like her, he too attempted to settle into the couch again. Sera glanced at him as he looked away, clearly lost in his thoughts and fears. Sera could only hope that James, like her, would trust in Chloe's judgement. So far it hadn't failed them. Perhaps there were an occasional lapse, but they were young and that was to be expected. This however… this was something no doubt Chloe would be on top of.

At least that was what she hoped…

"Is this why you're here?" James asked her, turning his attention once again back to her.

Sera shook her head. It wasn't, and she supposed it was about time to get back to her reason for being here. With the eyes of a District Attorney searching her for some sort of hint as to why she was sitting here in his office, Sera exhaled and smiled at James once again.

"I… just I was just wondering if you'd like to hang out with me some time…" she said to him as
she twisted her body to properly face him.

James just blinked at her.

"Hang out?" he repeated, incredulous at the idea Sera had suggested.

Sera nodded curtly, smiling a little wider now that it was out in the open. It was really all that she could do as the cogs in James’ head seemed to be turning, debating whether or not this conversation was actually happening.

"Yes," Sera replied, folding her hands on her lap. "As far as I know the kids are still doing that these days; why not us old people?"

Accepting that this was actually happening, James narrowed his eyes.

"And do what exactly?" he asked, his words carefully spoken as though he had stepped into a minefield accidentally. She supposed considering their history, it was not far from the truth.

Sera gave him a small shrug. She hadn't really gotten that far into the idea to have any sort of details or plans she could give him.

"I don't know for certain," she admitted to him as she slid a little closer. "We could walk the boardwalk, eat something, smoke and be cynical Gen-X losers attempting to recapture lost youth. You know… hang out."

James continued to stare for a moment before he turned away from her, leaving Sera apparently the only one left in this conversation. She ignored the urge to just stop trying and instead she pushed herself closer to him.

"You know, I'm taking a big risk here, asking you to do stuff without a plan to it," she said, attempting to instill some humor into this. "I keep everything organized, everything meticulous so that I am rarely left with facing an unknown to trip me up. Yet here I am, sitting in your office in disregard of a working policy to be here with you."

James did not acknowledge her, instead he pushed himself off the couch and silently walked over to the edge of his desk and sat down, his eyes locked on the door as though he either wanted nothing better than to escape this room and Sera as she continued to look up at him with a patience that barely masked her growing fear. She wondered if James understood the power he still had over her, and just his political pull. He still knew all the right things to say that would completely destroy her on the spot.

That was the trouble with opening your heart to another… they would learn the perfect means to destroy you at your core.

"Is sitting in the same room as I really a relapse trigger for you?" he asked her, his focus still not directed to her.

Sera shook her head. That wasn't what she was trying to convey… not really… She was trying not to make it about herself, but she was such a champion at screwing up that it was hard not to bring it back around to her.

"No, I'm saying that I'm trying here," she refuted his assumption. "I'm stepping well outside my comfort here and for your sake you need to try as well; because all of this… you drowning in your work, losing a ton of weight not taking care of yourself… we have our differences but I still care for you, and I don't want to see you… languish in this."
She stood up as well and approached him, keeping a relatively respectful distance between her and James, his intense glare at the door sent a shiver up her spine. It was a feeling she didn't have time to feel.

"You still have people who love you, and you throwing those people away for a ghost is not doing anyone any favours, and certainly not you," she pressed on, evincing as James stiffened. "I don't know where you're coming from, James. I cannot imagine how it must feel to have lost someone I loved like you and Rachel have… but believe me when I say that as low as you think you can get, you can always sink lower."

She knew full well how insensitive she must have sounded, but truth trumped comfort at the moment. She didn't know Rose well, but Rose was certainly not a woman who would want the man she loved to just lie down and die alongside her in spirit as he was only too happy to do.

James looked away from his focus on the wall behind Sera, and instead directed his attention to her,

"And what are you hoping to accomplish, exactly?" James spoke back, his voice slightly quivering with repressed fury "Rachel undoubtedly asked you to do this, right?"

Staring back at James, Sera took another tentative step forward; her heart was beating in overdrive as his intense focus was now completely devoted to her.

"Rachel provided me the justification to being here, yes…" Sera breathed out as she took another step forward. "…but… if I'm being honest, I have wanted to try this for some time now. I… thought we could try to be friends again."

The anger in James eyes somewhat faltered as the truth Sera wanted to say for a year and a half finally came out in the open. He just sat there looking at Sera and the mixture of earnest hope and utter embarrassment for being so open about what she wanted. In spite of her embarrassment, however, she stood by it. She locked her mouth shut so that she did not say anything stupid.

"I… thought we already were…" James asked out loud, the anger replaced with a curiosity. He furrowed his brow as Sera shook her head lightly.

"James, we both know that the only thing keeping us together the past few years has been Rachel," she reminded him as she laced her hands together. "I appreciate everything you've done for me and for the trust you shown… but at the end of the day it doesn't just… make us friends like that. I got the chance to start again with Rachel, and now I want to start again with you as well… I want to help you properly… without all the baggage we have."

Sera closed the gap. She hadn't blinked as the height difference between James and her become much more pronounced. Breathless, she extended her hand to reach his wrist. James was quicker; he batted her hand away and stood up straight, adding several more inches to his height.

"Is this some sort of pity thing? I'm not… I'm not interested in it, Sera..." he asked, his voice was incredulous sounding as he looked down on her.

Again she shook her head. Undeterred by his reaction, Sera reached out and grabbed his wrist again. This time he did not resist. The two of them stood there in a locked silence as Sera remained a calming sight as James looked like he was trying to regain control over his feelings.

"This is not pity. I want to be your friend James," she reaffirmed with as much strength as she could produce. "Before we… fell for each other, you were my best friend. You were the only
person in this world that I trusted implicitly. Falling for you was the easiest, most natural thing I had ever felt in my life… and then I lost it…"

Sera paused and allowed him a smile.

"I never thought I would get an opportunity to be in this position again, but here I am and I want nothing more than to have my best friend back," she pressed on, unable to hide the note of desperation any longer. "I want to be there completely for him, especially when I see him in this much pain and thinking he has to do this alone. Because you're not alone, and I want to help you see that. You have spent your entire adult life helping others, protecting others…would you please let me help you now?"

Sera breathed out unsteadily as finally had to blink. As she lowered her eyes and did her utmost to ignore the self-doubt now eating away at her, she felt James’ free hand reach out, and in a surprising display of tender care for a former love, turn enemy, turn whatever they were now, James pushed back her loose bangs back from out of her eyes.

Sera looked up immediately as another old familiar warm feeling broke through the layers she had built up around herself for her interactions with a man whom she loved… whom she still loved in a way that she shouldn't have. Her mind could give a million reasons why James Amber and her could never happen again, but her heart… it leaned towards the illogical desire that had hit her as she stared up at him.

"Fine," James agreed in a lower tone than usual. "We'll try this your way. I'll be on call tomorrow… so we can try this… hanging out thing then… okay?"

Sera smiled and reluctantly released her grasp on her ex-husband. As Sera took a step back, she could not help but slightly feel dazed by the small grin he wore. He seemed a little impressed that Sera had talked him into this.

"So…" James said to her, causal humour etched into his tone. "…a couple of Gen-X losers recapturing youth?"

Sera ran her hand over the back of her neck.

"Not everyone gets to run across the Northwest taking psychedelics with their blue haired vixen, but I think we can manage," Sera assured him. "We could meet at The Two Whales and we'll have breakfast first."

James nodded, apparently unaware that Two Whales meant Joyce, and Joyce meant Sera would have the opportunity to enact phase two of her plan in easing him out of his state. With her goal achieved, Sera stepped back from him and headed to the door, James following after her.

As they reached the door, Sera turned around and looked up at James once again. She wasn't exactly sure how to finish this conversation.

"Alright then, I will see you tomorrow," he said, doing her a favour and initiating their farewell for her. "But I'm warning you right now: If you make me listen to any more Riot Grrrl music I'm cancelling the whole thing."

Sera could not stem the laughter that erupted from her. She had almost forgotten about that. Playfully she rolled her eyes at him, her hand shoving his shoulder as her grin widened.

"Come on, you can't sit there and tell me I didn't rock your fucking world listening to L7," she blurted out, forgetting completely to filter her words
The two of them froze at Sera's confident statement. Sera could feel the heat overwhelming her senses as she stood there staring at the dumbfounded James. She wanted to die or run away from this room and hide for the next few days as she watched James reach back to run his fingers along his top vertebrae. She watched in numb surprise as James properly smirked.

"Okay… perhaps that was a good time," he admitted coyly as Sera pried open the door. "You know what though, wasn't that how Rachel was concealed? It would explain everything, or at least why she's with Chloe. I'll see you tomorrow then, Sera…"

Unable to provide a proper verbal response, Sera nodded and left the room mortified and perhaps a little surprised that she had gotten that much out of him. He was mourning, but he was still alive and still a man. Sera sighed as she forced herself not to sprint towards the nearest exit. If the path to heel was paved with good intentions, then she was dangerously close to trailblazing her way straight into her personal devil's bed.

If she was going to just be his friend, then that was all she was going to be. There couldn't be any room for anything else…

Maybe…

Chapter End Notes

Eeek, heterosexuals in a LiS story!

I know I know where is Amberprice and Maximum Victory! I said this was a summer of love, I didn't say that they would be the only pairings I focused on!

For real though, this section needed to be released, but it wasn't fitting into the next chapter or two, so like the Sera and James chapter long before it's just them, which will happen from time to time.

I got a comment about whether or not Rachel and Chloe would meet Max. When I explicitly state over the course of the story that Chloe and Rachel's journey would lead to Max, then I promise you it's going to happen.

As always I appreciate your continues support. Be sure to leave a message and I'll be sure to get around to answering it!

Next Chapter: Chloe and Rachel go on a journey. Or Victoria and Max continue to have no chill with each other. I guess it all depends on which side wants which more.
Clutching tightly to her car's steering wheel, Victoria Chase looked up at the Caulfield home with that familiar sense of uneasiness. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She wasn't so supposed to be this much of a mess. Over a girl no less!

To an outsider, Victoria's thoughts must have sounded like a broken record, but since all of this… started, it was really the only thing that she seemed to think about. Her excitement for her European getaway was pushed to the back of her mind, even the prospects of Mark Jefferson being her teacher next year was nothing compared as the doe eyed vixen had pretty much forced her to be her one constant thought.

The only thing she could take consolation in was that whatever this was, it wasn't nearly as pathetically fast as it had been with the only other couple who she had known to be in this sort of situation. From the stories she totally did not listen to, Rachel and Chloe were making out by the end of *The Tempest* like they had known each other for months. It was sickeningly sweet, and a total fucking cliché which Victoria went out of her way to insult in the early days.

She did not know why she did it. Smart money was on she just didn't want to… acknowledge something was also off with her as well, but the whole thing seemed like such a fucking joke. Like it was a means for both girls to rebel against their parents or some shit. The moderately wealthy and insanely popular girl was hooking up with the poor punk trash… it was not something to take serious.

Yet, here she was hanging out outside the Caulfield residence, and the same sort of shit she insulted Amber and Price for it was all she seemed to have wanted with Maxine Caulfield. Like the two of them and their lovey dovey shit, all that she wanted was to watch her smile and laugh, to rest in her arms, completely vulnerable and knowing that she would be safe. She wanted to taste those sweet looking lips, to hold a physical dominance over her, or even allow her to take command of her body.

Victoria gave her head a metaphorical shake. She was getting way fucking ahead of herself again. It seemed as though right now she was living in this weird place between accepting what she apparently actually was, and what she still wanted to be, or pretended to be. Being gay… it just seemed so fucking more complicated and much more of a hassle.

As insane as it must have seemed, there was a small part of her which resented Maxine for her role in this. The power Maxine held over her was obscene –whether she knew it or not. It was a worrying delusional of her to blame her for this. It seemed as though one look from her and all the illusions Victoria had desperately held onto as close as she could had receded and with that, it forced her to look at herself properly and objectively for the first time in years.

Unfortunately, honesty had a way of being brutal, and as she took stock of herself unfiltered and with clarity she now had, she did not like what she saw.

Hating the feeling of being in the dark, Victoria pulled off her seatbelt ad stepped out of the car. For a moment, just a brief moment she considered texting Rachel about it. Ask her for… advice on
this matter. Then she remembered who she was asking, and who she was basically attached to. There was no fucking way was she divulging anything to them. They might have been on good terms, any weakness, any hypocrisy shown and Amber and Price would leap to use it against her, and make next year worse.

With that sort of dread brewing in her thoughts, she would just have to do this alone as usual. So to ease her discomfort, Victoria did her best to rationalize her fears back into deepest recesses of her thoughts. Max wasn't like Chloe Price or Rachel Amber. She didn't seem to have an ulterior motive with her, nor would she go out of her way to insult or anything like that. She was far too sweet to be.

Fuck… Maxine probably wasn't even into her. Victoria was probably making a huge fucking assumption which would inevitably lead to a terrible end for the two of them. If she said something, anything, Maxine would reject it and that would be it. Her summer friendship would be over just like that.

As Victoria knocked on the door, she exhaled and forced herself relax. Perhaps it was better to just forget these stupid notions of someone like Maxine liking someone like her.

The door opened and there stood Vanessa Caulfield. She was a spitting older image of Maxine, but unlike her daughter she had the age and experience which seemed to erase all of her doubts. Maxine was very shy and indecisive if backed into a situation she wasn't prepared for. She preferred to weigh her options before leaping into anything. Vanessa was a little bolder, a little more like her strangely enough. Not in a snobbish bitch way, but she was willing to speak her thoughts.

With that in mind, it was not a surprise that was no hesitation on her Vanessa's part to allow Victoria in. There was no need for a second to consider the tall blonde's intentions as she took in the sight of Victoria standing in front of her. She didn't even have to bother with the 'hello' that Victoria was about to give Max's mother.

Instead, Vanessa smiled brightly and stepped out of the doorway and ushered her daughter's new friend into the home.

"Victoria, how are you doing?" Vanessa asked her as the mother closed the door behind the two of them.

Victoria smiled genuinely as she turned back to face Vanessa properly. The bitterness she felt for Maxine being obviously uninterested was once again back in her control. She could continue her illusion that there was still a chance at a friendship that expanded outside the boundaries of a friendship. She refused to use the right definition.

"I'm doing well, thank you Mrs…. Vanessa…” Victoria spoke, catching herself before she could use a title. "Is Maxine home? I'm here to ruin her day."

Vanessa's laughter for Victoria's self-deprecation was light as her eyes. She seemed to be genuinely enjoying Victoria's presence, which was a rarity in itself. Then again, it was rare for Victoria to set herself up as anything other than a dominant snob. She was trying something different and it seemed to be paying off, at least in the eyes of the Caulfield family.

"You're going to fit in well, here," Vanessa observed, obviously unable to notice the fluttering in Victoria at the acceptance. "Do you two have big plans for today?"

Victoria could only shake her head at first as she tried to digest Vanessa's care.
"No, not really, as far as I know," Victoria replied as she glanced at the staircase which she knew she would have to climb to Maxine's as of yet unseen bedroom. "We're just going to hang out…"

Vanessa arched her brow, as though she seemed to doubt Victoria's words, but it was the truth, the two of them only had plans to hang out and play things by ear rather than have some elaborate plan they had to stick to.

"Really now, she's been running around the house like a chicken with her head cut off getting ready for you all day, telling me not to be embarrassing," Vanessa observed, her voice curious as she examined Victoria. "I expected you would be coming over with some big scheme for the two of you, not just hang out…"

Vanessa trailed off. A strange sort of expression washed over her face. It was sort of like she seemed to be finally reassessing her now; but it wasn't in bad way. At least that was how it felt to Victoria. It seemed as though something had just sort of clicked together for her.

"Is everything okay, Vanessa?" Victoria inquired forcing back the small sense of fear she had trickle back to the surface as Vanessa stood there with a smile and soft, thoughtful looking expression.

Vanessa broke her focus and smiled again as she nodded.

"Yes… yes I am fine, dear," Vanessa replied, her voice quivering. "It's…well, it's just been a while since I've seen Max like this… totally enthused about someone. Between you and I, I think you're about to get stuck with a wonderful friend."

Vanessa's words drove a blow right through Victoria's already fragile barrier between how she felt and how she presented herself. She stood there, physically affected by the words Vanessa had spoken and unable to form the right words. So… as she opened her mouth to speak, she just knew she was about to fail.

"Well, if there is anyone I want to get sticky from…" she blurted out to Vanessa, the horror rising in Victoria as she heard it be spoke by her.

The mood shifted between the mother and the blonde as both remained locked in place and staring at one another. Victoria just wanted to bolt from the house, find a quiet spot and die just so that she didn't have to look at Vanessa, whose eyes widened Victoria's one hundred percent truthful greatest desire had been announced to her.

Victoria laughed out suddenly; it was less of a laugh and more of a nervous ticking stutter as she felt every cell in her body go into fight or flight mode. She must have sounded so fucking stupid, so completely obtuse.

Judging from the half open mouth and dumbfounded expression Vanessa had, she was probably right.

"That... really didn't come out right," she acknowledged to Vanessa in a higher tone. "Could you maybe just forget that and send me off to her room for both of our sakes?"

Vanessa closed her mouth and nodded quickly. Only too happy to end this new awkwardness before Victoria did or said something to push the fucking envelope even further, Vanessa gestured to the stairs and Victoria walked briskly away from Maxine's mother, her hand covering her reddening face.

It was decided. Victoria Chase would never speak to Vanessa Caulfield alone ever again. They
would just pretend that they didn't exist to each other.

Perhaps forever was a bit much… for now they would just try that silence at least for this morning. They'll have to play the whole eternity thing by ear.

...

...

It really didn't take as long to recollect herself after that fiasco with Vanessa as Victoria thought it might. She was going to go lock herself in the upstairs bathroom for a while so that she could recollect herself, but as she heard the gentle generic hipster music streaming gently from Maxine's room, all of her embarrassment simmered back down. She still could not fucking believe that she said that, but with Maxine being within a door's open, she would just have to forget it.

Inspecting her make up carefully to make sure she hadn't smudged it, Victoria, snapped shut her compact and dumped it into her purse. She reached up and knocked on the door.

"What's up?" Victoria heard from the other side of the door, it was, of course, that sweet honeyed tone of Maxine Caulfield. She sounded like she was distracted, but Victoria savoured the words anyways.

Victoria ignored her nerves and cleared her throat.

"Max, its Victoria... can I-"

Victoria did not even get a chance to finish her question. The door was pried open and before she had a chance to take in the sight of the short brunette girl, Maxine had reached out and pulled her inside the bedroom. As Maxine closed the door behind them, the two of them remained locked in silence. Maxine's hand was still wrapped firmly around Victoria's forearm as she stood there, unblinking as she looked up at Victoria, a small smile resting on her lips.

Victoria had a million thoughts and things she could have said right now, but she chose silence. The last thing she needed was blurted something foolish. She had already met her idiot quota for the day. She instead took in the sight of Max in a thin white tee and upper thigh length black running shorts, her face was a little sweaty. She could see the faintest outline of a pink bra through the shirt.

Victoria maintained her eyes on Max's, she would not acknowledge it, but she could not deny it was a good look for her.

"Your second visit and you're already making yourself at home? Max addressed Victoria; her voice was that agonizingly sweet teasing she had perfected. "I sort of figured you'd be a little more on ceremony… you know…standing at the front door waiting for me to come down and invite you in?"

Much to Victoria's disappointment; she watched as Maxine let go of her arm and turned away from her, walking back over to her desk. She took a seat in front of what appeared to be a dissembled camera she was attempting to fix or something.

"What can I say? When I like something, I like it," she said boastfully in a desperate attempt to get some praise, or a comment.

Fuck hell… she would settle for just one look from her.
Victoria's heart was pounding in her chest as her words earned her a turn of Maxine's head and a smile.

She felt sick from something as simple as Max just walking away from her. God… she hadn't turned into the next Rachel Amber – falling for someone in record time - Victoria had instead been reduced to that of Price… the lost little puppy looking for her constant validation from a beautiful girl. Either way she was pathetic, but this was so much worse. She was well beyond the simple worry of being marked as a cliché.

Ahhh fuck it… she was done worrying about that. It was the only way she could progress from here.

"What are you doing? " Victoria eagerly asked as she stepped forward, looking for something, anything to take her mind off this.

"Delicate work," Maxine murmured softly worked a screw out of the Polaroid camera. "I dropped my Camera shooting a vista session this morning... hoping beyond hope this isn't on its last legs right now."

"You know, maybe it's time to upgrade?" Victoria idly suggested attempting to keep her sarcasm levelled to a minimum. Maxine looked up and squinted at her as Victoria had continued their private good natured argument.

The two of them had spent an ungodly amount of time in real life and in text messages arguing the merits of digital technology and photography; and the two of them were on opposite sides of the spectrum completely. Victoria would call Maxine a dinosaur and Maxine and would start saying Victoria's latest purchases were already obsolete and it was time to upgrade.

It was fun in a strangely heated argumentative way. She was sure that there was a German word for it out there.

"So..." Victoria changed the subject as she placed her hand down on the table and leaned against it. "You didn't think to call me and we could go shooting together?"

Max twitched her lips and turned away from Victoria, her attention returning to working with her camera.

"I did, but I didn't want to disturb you," she quietly admitted, her eyes locked on her camera so that she did not have to look at Victoria. "I imagine hanging out with hipster trash is pretty exhausting. They make you do all sorts of weird, thankless things and they don't do common courtesy things like say thank you."

Victoria looked away from Max, her eyes focused on the wall of Polaroid's she had on the wall next to her bed. She could have called her any time for a session and Victoria would have fucking dropped everything to be there with her.

"It is pretty tedious…" Victoria said, hoping to look like she had some measure of cool still. "...but I admit I'm getting used to the eccentricities."

Max broke her focus on her Camera, a small mischievous grin crossing back over her luscious lips. "Oh yeah?" Maxine spoke brightly as she eyed up the blonde sitting over her like she was attempting to read her. "Would you have agreed to it even if the aforementioned hipster trash calls you up at 3 in the morning to shoot sunrise over Puget Sound?"
Victoria blinked as she silently took in Max's display of personal commitment to her craft. "God, that sounds terrible… fuck that…" Victoria answered her truthfully.

Together both of them broke down into laughter.

Victoria was, of course, just as committed as Max was to photography; but nothing and no one disturbed her between those hours. Not even Maxine Caulfield and her insatiable desire to hone her craft.

God at least that was how she thought would happen in theory. If Maxine showed up in front of her house at 3 in the morning with a thermos of coffee and a desire to shoot, she did not know exactly how it would go down; but one of these days, she would probably have to find out first hand if that feeling held up. In the back of her mind, she knew she would probably adhere to Maxine's wild requests, but she would not be too enthused about it.

As their laughter subsided, Victoria decided to stop being a fucking creeper and pushed herself off the desk to give Max some room to work in peace. She reluctantly turned her attention to the bedroom which she had left mostly ignored in favour of her friend. The bedroom was in a weird sort of cross between adulthood and childhood. It was tastefully decorated and painted a soft beige tone, but there were a lot of childish knick knacks including a one eyed teddy bear propped against the wall.

The walls themselves were plastered with a variety of photographs that were not included in Maxine's portfolio. They were all nicely shot, but the portfolio was definitely her hall of fame in comparison. The wall pictures seemed more like spur of the moment captures. The room, in a way was sort of like her personal art gallery.

As Victoria's eyes scanned across the room, she paused on one singular irregularity of Maxine's art gallery. Every single photo on the walls was unframed, unprotected. These were pictures of landscapes, people, her parents, her friends. All of them unprotected from weathering and time but one.

There, sitting on the top of a dresser was a photo of two girls. One wore an eye patch, and mess of freckles which covered her face, the other wore a pirate hat and was winking. She had her arm locked around what appeared to have been a child version of Maxine Caulfield. There was… something off about the strawberry blonde girl Maxine stood with… It was a familiar feeling that she neither could place her finger on nor shake. The eyes… the shit-eating smile she wore

"Maxine Caulfield, did you play pirates as a kid?" Victoria asked, finally managing to look away from the picture.

Maxine looked up from her work and tilted her head, looking adorable as fuck as she took in the sight of Victoria clutching the photo frame. A crooked smile spread over her lips as she nodded.

"I did, got a problem with it?" Maxine playfully challenges as she pushed herself out of her seat and stepped towards Victoria. "If you do I might as well send you off right now. Anyone who hates pirates is clearly not cool."

Victoria shook head as Maxine trusted her with the truth. If she could do that, so too could Victoria.

"I'm in no position to judge your piracy days, not when I used to play Dragon Balls in elementary school," Victoria I had marked tennis balls and I tried to turn into a Super Saiyan in the middle of
class when I was nine, and I… may have gotten sent to the school shrink for an evaluation for that."

Max laughed out at the confession Victoria had offered to her. For a moment, that familiar humiliation washed over her; but it was gone only moments later and she too allowed a laugh to escape. Maxine was not the Vortex club; she was not like Courtney or to a lesser extent Taylor and even Nathan. Max did not laugh out of judgemental derision or because she now had something to use against her. It was a genuine amusement which she would never weaponize and deploy against her.

Trust… it was such an amazingly precious thing these days…

"God, you're an anime hound as well?" Max asked her. As Victoria nodded, she added. "Well, we gotta watch some, sometime. You could spend the night tonight and we'll watch Final Fantasy: Spirits Within. It'll be fun!"

Victoria forced herself to remain calm. It was not the offer for a sleep over that had caught her off guard (not that she did not mind it) it was the fact that Max unironically stood there and had suggested a garbage attempt at capturing the Final Fantasy world without even approaching its neighbourhood. This girl clearly needed to know why it was so bad.

… But it was a lesson she was not going to teach, not as Victoria took in the clearly enthusiastic girl she was totally not crushing hard on.

"That sounds fun," Victoria replied, biting back the urge to be a total snarky bitch about Maxine's plebeian status. "Maybe I could introduce you to some anime that isn't western tiered entry level… What?"

Victoria fell silent as she looked at the strange expression Maxine wore. At first she was going to apologize for being a little snarkier than she had intended, but it was clear that Max wasn't mad. It was not far removed from the expression that Vanessa had earlier.

Watching as the mixture of curious and thoughtfulness Max wore dissipated; the brunette smiled and shook her head dismissively. She reached out towards Victoria, taking the picture frame from her hands so that she could hold the frame close to her.

"Nothing... It's fine…" Maxine murmured, still looking at the smiling strawberry blonde. "It's just… you just… for a moment you sound like my Captain. She always teased me about my anime tastes as well."

Victoria smiled and took a step forward.

"Well now a girl after my own heart," Victoria returned. "What is yonder Captain's name?"

Max looked up and sort of half smirked at Victoria's lame a fucking hell and already regretted attempt at pirate speak. Still, Maxine seemed a little elated by it, so it was worth the added humiliation. She looked the photo once more before she gestured to it.

"This, Deck Hand Chase, is Captain Chloe Price..."

If Maxine was speaking, Victoria was not paying attention as the name burned a hole through her thoughts.

There was no way that this world could be this small. There was no way that sweet, wonderful Maxine Caulfield not only knew the Queen Consort of Blackwell but was childhood friends with
her. It seemed like such an oil and water mixture. Chloe Price, the conniving violent cunt who… well… was the closest thing to an honest and objective friend she ever had gained during her time in Blackwell.

Suddenly everything that was going on… everything that Victoria and Max were playing with… there was no longer a distance between who she was in real life, and who she was in the here and now during this summer. Everything was real and dangerously close to blurring the lines she had hoped to keep distinct from each other.

Yet, as she looked into Maxine’s eyes… she wasn’t afraid of this as she should have been. In the off chance that there was something… more to this… it did not frighten her in the way it did at the very beginning. She watched, silent as Max rubbed her neck and turned away, still holding the photo of Chloe in her opposite hand.

"I fucked up with her so bad," she admitted, her voice drained of emotion. "If I do the same to you, you have my permission to kick my ass."

As Victoria watched Max slump down onto the bed, she felt her insides lurch as Max looked up at her and patted the place next to her. She obliged her friend and sat down next to the brunette who had turned her attention back to the photo of the girl.

Silently, Victoria looked at it as well and took in image with renewed interest. With the knowledge that this was indeed Chloe Price, she could now see her properly in this image captured long before she was turned into what she was now: a punk who was navigating an unimaginable mount of loss and guiding another girl arguably more dangerous and damaged through her own.

Damn did life have a way of making everyone its bitch…

"Would you like to talk about it?" Victoria broke their silence.

Max held onto the silence for a little longer. It was obvious that she wanted to speak, to finally have an opportunity to open up about something that she seemed to keep bottled up. She sighed and looked up to Victoria.

"I'm from Oregon. A small town called Arcadia Bay," Max told her, not paying attention to how unsurprised Victoria looked. "Chloe is… Chloe was my best friend, attached to the hip. You could never ask for a good a friend from someone. My Dad… he got a job in Seattle and so we moved. Chloe and I were going to keep and touch. We were hanging out… sort of a last hurrah I guess."

Max paused and looked briefly at the ceiling as she tried to find the right words to tell something which Victoria more or less already knew.

"Chloe’s Dad went out to go and pick up her Mom… and he was killed," she pressed on. "We only stayed a little while longer after that… Chloe… tried to stay in touch… she didn't have to but she did. I… I just… I blew her off at every turn. I couldn't talk to her, I didn't know what to do, what to say…"

Max swallowed thickly, her head shaking as she unconsciously rubbed her eyes, even if there were no tears which had fallen yet.

"If that's how I respond to something like that…" Max continued miserably. "I don't see how I ever deserved to be her frien-

Victoria reached out; her index pushing against Max's lips to bring silence to that fucking bullshit line of thinking Max was brewing. Although Max had fallen silent and still, she could feel Max’s
lips quivering. She looked close to breaking down into tears for a friend she had wronged so long ago.

She wouldn't tell Maxine not to cry. She had no right to shame her for what she felt, but she couldn't just sit here and do nothing. If she cried, she would cry, but not without Victoria at least trying to stem it.

"Maxine, you were so young. You can't just expect to know what to do. Maybe you could have handled it better, maybe you could have kept in touch, but you didn't and that's just something you have to live with, otherwise the what-if's will just tear you up. The past is just a series of regrets and what-if's, and the more deal on it, the more power you give it over you, and then you then it because… fucking impossible to just… find peace and let go."

Although Victoria removed her finger from Max's lip, Max was too quick for Victoria. She took Victoria's hand and folded it over hers. They remained in a strange silence as Maxine attempted to digest Victoria's words. She seemed almost… comforted by what she had said. It was like Victoria was some sort of guiding voice.

While she may have felt that the Chase woman was pure in her motivations, Victoria felt a guilt bubbling up. She held all the answers Max needed, and yet… she couldn't just… bring herself to answer the questions Max didn't know she had about her friend Chloe. Telling the truth, admitting that she not only knew Chloe but was in a quasi-friendship with her would have made everything that much more complicated. It brought Max into her world, and if Max knew the truth… she wouldn't stay for very long.

Who would?

Victoria bit back her self-loathing. She was a terrible, selfish, hypocritical bitch… and already she had damaged whatever was going on between Maxine and her…

"Who knows… maybe Chloe has found some measure of happiness now," Victoria spoke, allowing a little shred of knowledge be shared as a hypothesis rather than a fact. "Four years is a long time to nurse a broken heart. I doubt she would be mad for very long if you were to… I don't know… give her a call…"

Taking the photo from Max's hands, Victoria paused and swallowed her pride as she examined the smiling bright face of Price. She would have to say something nice about Chloe Price… Thank fuck that no one would get to hear it except Maxine.

"Something about her… she seems like someone who if you're friends with, you're stuck with her. You think it's over, but there she is again…" she managed to say out loud through gritted teeth. "She's probably sort of like… herpes…yes, you know now that I think about it, I'm quite sure this Chloe Price is exactly like herpes…"

That back handed compliment about loyalty was enough to get Max to choke out a laugh and give Victoria a gentle slap on the shoulder. It helped to greatly improve Max's move, so Victoria took the attack as a small punishment as a good thing.

"That's so gross, Victoria. For cereal…" Max complained through her laughter. She emitted a disgusted noise and shook her head as she added. "I got pretty heavy there, I'm sorry Victoria. This sort of baggage should be a little further down the road, right?"

Victoria shrugged and allowed her a faint smile. She had just done something far worse than Max did in the past.
"At this point I'm throwing out the whole rulebook… you should as well…" Victoria returned.

As Max nodded, the two of them went quiet again. They were still holding each other's hand, both of them seemingly unable to look at each other. Occasionally green eyes would meet blue and the two of them would sort of chuckle as their nerves got the best of them.

There were… thoughts… forming in Victoria's mind which she could not fight for very long. Things she wanted to do. Things she couldn't do. Sitting here was an agony she had never quite felt before in her life.

"I don't… know if I can fix my camera..." Max thankfully cut through the tension. "I sort of have an idea, but... I'm mostly just winging it with Google, Wikipedia and prayer right now."

Reluctantly releasing Max's hand, Victoria stood up and tried to block out her lurid thoughts. Getting that camera fixed was now her focus, and it was an infinitely preferable thing to focus on right now. Over the fact she was lying to Max about not knowing a girl she clearly cared for still, and especially that dirty little instinct screaming at her to something to the girl, who probably didn't think of her that way...

"Pack up your ancient tech in a box or something, then," Victoria replied. "We'll take it to a repair shop then."

Max frowned.

"I don't have that kind of money-"

"I guess it's a good thing that I do then," Victoria interjected over Max's dismissal as she went to grab her purse. "We'll make a day out of it. I haven't hit the Bouquets in a few weeks. We're going to have some fun and you're going to stop moping. Find you some actual clothing to wear instead of you raiding your mom and dad's closet with the occasional thrift shop splurge."

The banter may have been a thing, but that was all it was: banter. If anything, the idea of going out with Max doing random teenaged shit rather than them being super serious taking photos and analyzing each other's work was appealing right about now. She just… needed an exit, and if she couldn't get it through drinking or getting stoned, then she would just have to do it with the thrill of the almighty dollar.

She turned back and found Max was standing. She looked… conflicted over this. She was obviously interested in the offer she was making; but the modesty, the apparent doubt she seemed to have prevented her from reaching out and seizing the opportunity she was being presented.

"I can't..." Max started and then immediately stopped as she searched for the right words. "Victoria, if you're paying to repair my camera, then I won't be proud...I can pay you back for that, no doubt... but I can't just take clothing from you as well."

Victoria pursed her lips together. She stepped forward and laid her hand down on Maxine's shoulder.

"Maxine, stop being so fucking modest, stop thinking the world only turns if you put yourself behind others," Victoria spoke in a low, almost rumbling tone she once heard Chloe Price use on Rachel and watched it turn the usually unconquerable Rachel to mush. "We are going to go out, and we're going to shop, I'm going to buy you a couple outfits, because I got money and I have no one worth spending on until... well, you came along."

As it had on Rachel, it worked on Max as well.
Victoria watched stunned as Max just sort of stood there open mouthed and astounded. All of her protests vanished before Victoria's eyes; and instead of continuing to fight against her, Max just sort of nodded, numb as she stood there looking up to the taller blonde.

Chloe Price, as it turned out, was a fucking macking genius. Victoria gave her head a mental shake. Now she fucking had something else she owed to the punk.

"I'm going to go downstairs, you're going to get dressed into something halfway presentable and then we'll head out," Victoria continued to the attentive brunette. "If it makes you feel better, you'll pay for lunch and I won't buy you anything super expensive. Is that fair to you?"

Max nodded seemingly accepting the compromise Victoria was willing to provide; and with the two of them in an agreement, Victoria let go of Max's shoulder and stepped backwards towards the door. There was a flash of a feeling… the reaction she had gotten… perhaps the idea of Maxine Caulfield was interested in her far more than she was assuming.

"Okay then… that was a good talk…" Victoria said as she opened the door and forced the happy concept back inside her. "Don't worry about the cost, Max. There does need to be a fashion gap between us after all. I can't let you hog my spotlight, now can I?"

Victoria stepped out of the room and closed the door behind her. She did her utmost not to fist pump as she heard Max on the other side of the door seemingly thud hard down onto her chair. She turned her focus back to the Chloe Price- Maxine Caulfield connection instead.

God… this was going to get so fucked up, so fast…

Chapter End Notes

Alright, it's time to get back to Rachel and Chloe. As always, thank you for reading. I'm always surprised by the reaction. I'll see you soon.
It was early morning when Rachel woke up from her stupor.

Jesus Fucking Christ, all that she wanted right now was to go back to sleep for the next three days...

The girls backed down on the whole 'let's take a peyote trip in the desert' idea that Rachel had pushed. Sera started sending them a series of passive roundabout pleas for them to back down as well as a couple of videos of the after effects of Peyote on a person, so in they instead traded hallucinogenic drugs for a bottle of legal poison (aka tequila) which they polished off and spent the night utterly plastered, which Rachel supposed was more or less something they did all the time.

Although they were in a desert, she could feel the cold air coming through the cracks in the window of the motel room they had rented so that the two of them did not have to sleep in the truck or set up camp somewhere intoxicated. She sighed and pushed herself deeper into Chloe's chest; one finger reached up and gently worked its way into one of her stray locks.

Rachel Amber was kinda angry.

Her anger (annoyance was probably a better word for it) was directed at the conversation Chloe and her had had about a week ago in Port Orford. That marriage was a remote chance for them even after she hit 18. It was a wake-up call about what she was and she just could not quite shake it from her thoughts. Sure, she thought men could be attractive, but nothing about them came close to what she had felt for Chloe.

With that attraction, with the love that she felt for Chloe came all the titles she had more or less avoided using to describe her and what she had with Chloe. Notably was that what they had was pretty gay. Two years into them being together and only now she was trying to rectify what they were together and what people were probably calling them behind their back.

God… she was too drunk for these thoughts right now. Her point was that she wanted to get fucking married anywhere she pleased and not have fucking fucks tell her no, but no one fucking said no to Rachel Fucking Amber; especially not when it involved shit that no one else had a say in it.

Now, she accepted Chloe's argument about waiting, no problem. Rachel was willing to admit that they were young as fuck to just up and get married, and after what happened to Dad and Sera. Dad and Sera was the clearest cut example why you don't just jump head fucking first into matrimony, because not everyone was lucky to have a parent like Joyce had in William Price. Chloe could have been a carbon copy of patient, steady William, but she would still have to deal with Rachel's temperamental nature.

Another aspect which gave Rachel pause was the shit show that inevitably would have entailed. She had promised both herself and Joyce that the two of them would try to work on being friendlier with one another; and she doubted very much that would happen if she came back with Chloe after a whirlwind trip to Massachusetts or New York with all the proper paperwork.
But while she might have accepted logic to postponing, she did not like being disallowed from something she wanted and didn't harm anyone. It drove that little part of her mind that made her crave what she could not have to take what she wanted and fuck all the consequences. Christ... she had to check that indulgence to stir shit... she would end up like her mother... biological mother.

Noticing her phone tangled in Chloe's cleavage (her phone holster from time to time) she slipped her fingers forward and tapped the screen. Sure enough two unread messages awaited her, but she squinted at the name of who had sent them.

Victoria Chase.

Rachel racked her brain. She could vaguely recall that Victoria had spent the better part of a month bragging to whoever would listen that she would be sojourning to Europe for the summer, which she conveniently dropped on them when Chloe and her road trip plans were leaked by Juliet Watson. Chloe spent a good week ready to fight Victoria on the grounds of stealing their thunder.

Victoria Chase – You there?

Victoria Chase – Pick up the fucking phone there's shit that needs to be said

God, what in the fuck could she have wanted?

Rubbing her eyes, Rachel bit the bullet and tapped the call button. It was better to just get it out of the way while Chloe was asleep and unable to insert her commentary which would in-fucking-evitably lead to a big blowout. She didn't have the mental strength nor had eye coordination to type anything legible, so fuck it, she'd call.

The phone rang three times, before the line was picked up on the other end.

"Make it quick Victoria," Rachel immediately spoke before Victoria could talk. "I'm drunk as hell and you're disturbing my sleep."

At first there was only a brief silence before she finally heard it.

"Hello, you have reached Victoria Chase," a very gentle sleepy voice which wasn't Victoria's voice in the slightest greeted her. "I'm afraid she cannot come to the phone right now as Her Majesty is in disposed. Would you like to leave a message?"

Rachel checked the time. It was only 9 in the morning and the girl on the other end of the line was not Taylor or Courtney or anyone from the Vortex Club. In fact as a rule, no one got to use Victoria Chase's phone fucking ever; and now on top of that, whoever this was, it as though she seemed brave enough to dismiss any sort of reputation Victoria Chase had made for herself.

...or perhaps she wasn't aware of it at all in the slightest...

All of this peaked Rachel's curiosity far more than she was prepared for this early and this intoxicated to handle this right now. The only thing she wanted to know was just who in hell was this girl?

"Her Majesty..." Rachel repeated, placing a small tired chuckle into her words. "Wow, someone out there who calls her out too and you have access to Victoria's phone... and why, may I ask, do you have access to Victoria's phone?"

"Oh, mostly because Victoria is supposed to be getting us breakfast and she's a slowpoke," the girl replied back before adding. "...coincidentally that's her favourite Pokemo-"
"OH MY GOD, SHUT UP!" Rachel heard the familiar shriek of Victoria Chase.

From the sound of it, there was a fumbling battle for the phone going down. The girl on the other end was fighting back and laughing; but what was much more strange, was that so too was Victoria. Rachel could not imagine any situation where Victoria would allow herself to be dragged down to any position lower than what she built herself up as. Whatever this was… it had captured her curiosity for real now.

Damn... Rachel kind of liked her already...

"Yeah, who is it," Victoria demanded, having apparently won her little battle against the girl she was chilling with.

"It's Rachel… you texted me…" Rachel reminded her. "…who's the girl?"

Rachel knew better than to get an answer, and she was right. Victoria blew over that part. She could hear the sound of footsteps on the other end as Victoria apparently went to go and find somewhere quiet and out of the way to talk. Rachel idly wondered if Victoria was shrugging off her obviously self-hating ways, but right now she just didn't give that much of a shit to push for anything of substance.

"I can't talk for long," Victoria replied briskly. "Look, I owe you two for what happened. If you two are in Seattle anytime soon, you both can crash at my place or whatever... There's some... weird shit I need to talk to you about in person."

Chase was opening her home up for the two of them? What the hell was going on in her mind right now? Wasn't she supposed to be getting ready for Europe? None of this was making any sense. It probably would have if she was sober, but right now it was mostly just a tiring blur and all Rachel wanted as to go back to sleep. As before, she just didn't give a single solitary fuck anymore.

"So... Victoria Chase is a Pokémon Master, hey? Please thank that girl for me, will you? I was always partial to the red one with a fire tail myself…" Rachel replied as she attempted to use her limited knowledge in the subject. "Come on Vickie.... who is the girl-"

"Yeah, fuck you too, Rachel!" Victoria interjected and hung up on her.

Happy that disturbance was dealt with for the time being, Rachel grinned and threw her phone on the counter and pushed herself back against Chloe, closing her eyes. She had a plan for today, but for now they another three hours or so before they would have to check out. It would be plenty of extra rest for the drive chauffeuring Chloe on.

"Whozzat about…" she heard coming above her.

Chloe had been stirred awake by the conversation. This was the last thing she had wanted to do. Rachel sighed and leaned forward, kissing what skin she could reach with her limited mobility. In this case it would be Chloe's right breast, which suited her fine. Any excuse to kiss some Priceless Tits, was an excuse she would not pass up.

"Victoria being fucking Victoria again…" Rachel mumbled as she pulled her lips back from Chloe's revealed cleavage. "...you know I think she may like us. You're not going to believe this, but I think Victoria might be into someone... a girl no less…"

Rachel smiled as she felt Chloe's hand reach out and run through her hair soothingly. It was a massage which helped ease some of the tension brewing in her head. Reaching out, Rachel snaked her arms around Chloe's waist and drew herself closer so that she could listen to Price's strong
"You're right, I don't believe it," Chloe murmured back sleepily as she nestled the top of Rachel's head with her chin. "I'll eat my fucking beanie the day Victoria Chase descends from her perch, stops being a self-involved closeted bitch and tries to love someone else for a change."

Rachel breathed a small sigh. Chloe was very logically cynical about Victoria Chase. This was rooted in deeds accumulated through the years. Rachel could not fault Chloe for that policy, especially when Rachel as a rule subscribed to it as well. While that was the case, there was definitely a part inside of her that wanted Victoria to find a modicum of happiness as well. For her to find someone she could trust. Judging from what she heard, it sort of seemed like she had finally found that in someone. If that was what was happening, then all she could do was hope for the best.

"...and what if I'm right?" Rachel decided to pursue.

Chloe sort of grunted as she pressed her lips against Rachel's forehead.

"If you're right, we're going to have to pre-emptively kick a rich girl's ass before she says something awful... just in case..." Chloe replied without hesitation.

Rachel smirked and nodded at the predictable but perfectly reasonable answer to the question. Yes, she supposed that asskicking would have to be an inevitability.

...

Chloe Price was not scared of much in this world. But there was one thing that terrified the hell out of her the most: Rachel Amber driving.

Rachel had the basics down no sweat. Her problem was that she was not timid behind the wheel, or safe. Instead she drove like a demon out of hell down these busted ass Oregon back roads, quickly getting frustrated by other drivers and swerving around them. If Rachel was in a sports car or something a little more finesse, she would be at home, but this was a mid to late 1980's truck they found in a fucking junkyard.

Perhaps this was why she did not mind being the driver of the two of them. Every time Rachel drove for her, she was God's biggest fan.

As worrying as it might have been, Chloe was still somewhat curious as to why Rachel was in such a hurry to leave desert lands and head north. Even in the face of a terrifying hangover, somehow Rachel could have plans brewing in her mind. Not that Chloe minded of course, it kept her on her toes.

There had also been some talk of moving on, heading north to Portland before they crossed the border into Washington State. This was something she both dreaded and looked forward. With Rachel's birthday fast approaching, Rachel wanted a little class. They would rent out a nice place, eat at nice places, and find a nice tattoo artist to get their long anticipated Tats. It would be a nice, classy week or so in America's premiere hipster city.

As fucking cool as it be to finally get to Portland and as neat as it was to venture through regions of the state neither Rachel or her had been to before, the two of them were inching closer and closer to Seattle; closer to her encounter with Max Caulfield; even with literal years of build-up... she wasn't
ready for this.

She had no fucking clue what she was going to say or do about it. She was settling somewhere between screaming and hugging the ever loving fuck out of the girl. Considering just how much Chloe may have discussed her history with Max to Rachel, Rachel unsurprisingly suggested giving her a big old sloppy kiss. It wasn't some jealousy thing, at least not anymore. Rachel loved to push the boundaries and the buttons of other people. It was a shadow of who she used to be before all the shit that happened.

Rachel's recommendation... well… it might have crossed Chloe's mind on more than one occasion. There was a history to Max and her that she could not ignore. She would just have to wait and see. It was quite possible that Max had long since moved on and Chloe was now just grasping for a friend she no longer had.

Chloe glanced to Rachel, who was adorable as fuck at how focused on the road. The truck bounced underneath them as Rachel had taken them off the road and onto to a dirt road leading to what appeared to be an improvised parking spot. Chloe noticed the sign they past ready Crooked River Observation Point. Chloe looked back to her girl, wondering again just what was going on in that head of hers.

As Rachel brought the tuck to a stop, she turned the key and pocketed them. She turned back, smiling as she pulled off her seatbelt. She leaned forward, kissing Chloe's cheek briefly

"Come on, Priceless, we have places to be!" she announced as she pulled back and opened the door.

As Rachel stepped out of the truck, Chloe unbuckled herself and slid across the truck bench seat and squinted as the sun hit her eyes. Rachel closed the door behind them and took Chloe by the hand, not allowing her a moment to collect herself.

As they walked Chloe took in her surroundings. There was nothing particular to note, if you didn't count the fact that the two of them were standing on the edge of a canyon gorge which had a railway track bridge running from one side of the canyon to another. Chloe wouldn't have been particularly interested in it had Rachel not been dragging her up the manmade embankment to the bridge.

"You... took us to a bridge?" Chloe could only voice the obvious.

Rachel nodded as they made it up the embankment and found themselves standing on wood, steel and iron. She turned back to Chloe and grinned even wider, as she reached out and looped her arm around Chloe's waist. She was the cat to Chloe's canary apparently.

"This is the only river gorge bridge I could find in the vicinity," Rachel spoke up as she walked Chloe along the train tracks, "I always wanted to go and stand in the middle of one. Don't ask why, the reasons are non-existent. I have ideas and you know me…"

Rachel trailed off as the two of them reached the edge between safe ground and the drop to the winding shallow river below. She turned back and arched her brow at Chloe who remained locked in place several steps behind where she had stood.

"Chloe Fucking Price, if you're going to tell me you're afraid of heights I am so not going to be impressed with you for the next 12 seconds!" Rachel teased her, her hands jutting against her hips.

Chloe Price was not afraid of heights. She was not a fan of being in the dark.
"I want to know what's going on first," she called to Rachel, squinting back at her as her head throbbed from last night's overindulgence.

The confusion of Chloe's refusal to blindly follow washed away from Rachel's expression. She slinked forward; her eyes were hooded as joined her girlfriend again, her hands slipping into the waistband of Chloe's shorts as they stood on the edge together.

"You're less than two hundred feet away from learning what's going on..." she salaciously breathed to the taller girl. "... Are you really going to back away now?"

Chloe remained silent as she gently grasped Rachel's feather earring, the small tug earned the smallest of gasps from Rachel as she in turn tightened her grip and pushed herself even closer until body meshed into body. As Chloe nodded, Rachel stepped on the tips of her toes and sunk into Chloe's giving her a deep, sensory numbing kiss.

"My brave girl..." Rachel whispered throatily as she pulled back. "I'm so proud you're mine..."

Releasing her grasp on her waist, Rachel captured Chloe's hands and took slow steps onto the bridge proper; Chloe now entranced enough to follow her along without any further complaint. She had gone from being curious to officially intrigued by just what it was her girl had in store for them.

As the two of them reached the middle of the bridge, Rachel let go of Chloe and took a step away. She glanced over the edge, a sly grin crossing over her mouth as she gestured Chloe to follow her. Chloe obeyed and silently looked over the edge. She really fucking wished that she hadn't.

"I've been thinking a lot the past few days about our talk..." Rachel spoke up over the loud wind gusting through them. "I've thought about how we're too young to get married, and the whole 'we're gay for each other and America is apparently still a fundamentalist country that has to stick its nose in our shit' thing and I know you're right, but I was wondering if you would like to bind yourself to me..."

Chloe blinked as she watched Rachel dig into her pocket. What in the absolute fuck was she talking about?

"What... the fuck are you talking about?" Chloe asked her blankly, "... and why the hell do you have a knife?"

Her eyes fell and looked at the switchblade held firmly in Rachel's hand. She looked up and directed her curiosity to Rachel, who looked somehow defiant and needing validation from Chloe for her decision to carry a fucking weapon on her. Like... wasn't it fucking illegal?

"I have a knife because I can't buy a gun yet, and I'm not going out into the world without something to protect us... protect you," Rachel replied as though she had rehearsed it "... and what I'm talking about is you and I bonded by blood."

Chloe rubbed her face and turned away. If she was going to bring a fucking weapon on this trip, the least she could have done was tell her. Chloe wasn't about to sit here and deny it was not the right move. They had seen how bad shit could get and if she could get access to a gun, then the knife was the next logical step.

As for this bonded by blood thing... well, Chloe had no fucking clue what to chalk this up to. Rachel was always sort of into mysticism like astrology and horoscopes, but it was less so these days after Rose. She always seemed to want to be facing firmly towards what was directly in front
of her rather than focusing on the background world.

This sounded something which Chloe would have thought up with Max, which they did do at one point… with a thumbtack, not a knife. Neither of them could break the skin… but this was something on a whole other scale.

"Dude, how drunk are you still..." Chloe attempted to lighten the mood.

Rachel's smile vanished off her face. This was not one of those light moments. This was something well past serious.

"I'm not drunk, Beth," Rachel replied, using her pet name. "I just… Chloe Price you're my best friend, my one love; and all I seem to think about these days is pushing the boundaries, to push what we are into what we can become. That conversation was a drop in the bucket compared to the thoughts that swim in my head whenever you're in my thoughts, and lately you are always in my thoughts. I want you to be my forever Chloe, and since I can't have that for some time, I want to do the next best thing. We'll be together in a way nothing and nobody can stand against."

Rachel went silent as Chloe went over what she was saying. She wasn't sure why… but there was some sense in it. It was love, love from Rachel to want to make such a sweeping potentially embarrassing disaster, and love from Chloe that made her want to say yes to this romantic - albeit odd – request.

"It's… kinda badass… sorta…" Chloe admitted to Rachel, a small disbelieving grin crossing over her mouth.

Rachel arched her brow; she was obviously thrilled that Chloe seemed to be on the same page.

"Hella badass," Rachel said as she offered the knife out to Chloe. "You cut me, I'll cut you next."

Looking at the knife in the palm of Rachel's hand, Chloe snatched it up and flicked the blade open. Rachel had not taking back her hand. She held it out in a display of sacrifice for their commitment. Exhaling Chloe gripped Rachel's wrist and brought it close to her face.

Chloe looked up and met the expression of determination written in Rachel's face. She was committed completely.

"It's okay baby…" she breathed to Chloe. ".…a girl's first time is supposed to be painful…"

Biting back her smirk, Chloe nodded and pressed her lips against Rachel's palm. She pulled back, and without any pause, she ran the blade along her flesh. It was deep enough to leave a mark. As the blood started to flow, Chloe watched in amazement as the only noise Rachel made was a sharp inhale and an abrupt snorting noise.

Taking the knife from her, Rachel pressed her lips against Chloe's and pulled back as she raised Chloe left hand and immediately ran the blade along the exact same spot. Chloe grunted as the nerve endings in her hand fucking screamed throughout her entire body.

Rachel threw the knife off the bridge and stepped forward, placing her bleeding hand into Chloe's. Together the two of them watched as Rachel pushed their hands out over the edge and allowed their intermixed union of dark sanguine roll off their hands and trickled into the river below their feet.

"My blood and my life, your blood and your life... it's one in the same now, for real," Rachel gasped out through her growing pain. "You are everything to me, my Chloe Elizabeth Price."
Rachel fell silent and looked expectedly up to her new blood wife. Chloe could only emit a shit eating grin. This wasn't exactly how she thought the day was going to go. She had no words prepared… all she had was one absolutely stupid thought running through her head that she knew she shouldn't voice, but fucking did anyways.

"You do realize you stole this whole thing out of fucking Natural Born Killers, right?" she blurted out. "Blood bonding on a bridge so that the blood goes into the water... you're such a dork."

Rachel sort of squinted at her… it was not exactly what she had expected to here, but she was not about to argue the point. Not when the small grin she had clearly recognized Chloe was not far from the fucking truth about this whole thing. They had become Mickey and Mallory Knox without the body count… God, she was a secret nerd…

"Other than that… I'm with you… until the end…" Chloe added, leaning in to kiss her forehead. Rachel smiled properly as the two of them leaned against each other, their hands painfully gripping each-others to compress their self-inflicted injuries. Chloe was put on the spot and she seemed to be factoring that in.

"Good save, Priceless-"

Rachel was cut off by the sound of a whistle blast from the other side of the river. They looked and noticed a loaded freight train rolling their way. The two of them broke apart and ran at full tilted towards back towards the truck, sliding down the embankment.

As Chloe stood up, pulling Rachel with her, she unconsciously wrapped her hand in her shirt as they walked and limped towards the truck. Perhaps running like that was a little dramatic considering the Train was rolling along with a dozen plus boxcars, but Chloe Price didn't fuck with trains. She watched too many Liveleak videos.

There was a small slap on her shoulder.

"Come on, don't use your shirt, you savage!" she heard Rachel cry out to her. "We got a first aid kit, remember?"

As Rachel threw her the keys, Chloe emitted a dramatic sigh.

"Goddamn… five minutes into ritualistic blood marriage and you're already fuckin' naggin' me…" Chloe muttered theatrically behind her as she went to open the truck up.

Rachel rolled her eyes as the blood continued to clump in the dirt she was standing in.

"Bitch." Rachel called out to her.

"Double bitch." Chloe snapped back.

"Victoria."

As soon as Rachel dropped the V bomb, it was all over. She supposed it was their first argument and the wife, of course, won it.

Knowing there was nothing in the world that could count Victoria Chase's cuntery Chloe threw up her hands in surrender and reached into the glove compartment, pulling out the slightly ill-fitting bag which Sera had presented them the day they had left. Taking a seat on the edge of the truck bench, Chloe dug through the bag, finding a small bottle of antiseptic, medical tape and fabric
Chloe was about to fasten the bag up and join Rachel when she noticed something peculiar. Strangely, there was a small second black bag buried in the bottom of the kit. She unzipped it and stared at the contents for a good long moment, not entirely sure what to make of what she was staring at.

"Rach," she called out to out, unable to break her attention from the contents of the second bag. "Why are there drugs in the first aid kit?"

Rachel snapped her head back; all the good humour was lost as the implication became clear. As she stamped towards her, Chloe only had a long enough amount of time to reach in and remove a small note written on paper before Rachel snatched the bag out of her hands and removed the strange sort of injectors.

"What in the fuck…" Rachel muttered to her, looking up from the drugs to Chloe as Chloe read the note left for them.

-R&C

You're going off into a world that can be exciting wondrous and frightening. You may end up in absolutely beautiful places, and you may end up in the seedy North-western underworld as well. Wherever it may be, I only want you to be prepared for anything you may encounter during your journeys.

In this kit are Naloxone nasal sprays as well as the proper instructions of how to administer the shots. Naloxone is an anti-opioid used to block the effects of an overdose. You are heading into Portland and Seattle, both of which have a huge drug culture, and I will not pretend that you won't be close to that scene. If you are to witness an overdose or god forbid have one, it is better you are prepared instead of waiting on an EMT who may or may not have a spray on hand.

If you do witness an overdose, do not hesitate with it. You could change the life you have saved. It was a stranger who saved my life with a Naloxone shot, and that encounter gave me a second chance to turn everything around, a second chance to finally be with you, Rachel as well as an opportunity to make a wonderful new friendship in you, Chloe. For this, I ask you to pass on this second chance to someone else should the need arise.

Until then, I love you both and I look forward to your safe return back home.

Love,

-Sera <3

Chloe looked up and noticed the anger mounting on Rachel's face. Realizing she was making an assumption. Considering the sordid past of her mother, it was an understandable flare up, so Chloe quickly pressed the note into Rachel's hand.

"Dude, your Mom gave us anti-heroin drugs and made it hella fucking cute," she remarked brightly, hoping to ease out some of the tension growing in Rachel. "You know, I might have to marry her instead."

Rachel did not look up at the remark; she carefully was reading the note.

"My mom is straight…" Rachel reminded her as she held her eyes low on the note between her uncut hand.
Chloe smirked.

"Yeah, she's straight up for my pussy..." Chloe retorted without a pause.

That was all it took. Rachel immediately snapped her head up and shrieked incoherently at her new blood bride. In a mixture of laughter and screams and their injuries almost forgotten for the time being, the smaller girl chased after the taller one with murder in her mind.

Well, that or something close to it.

Chapter End Notes

Rachel was a weird girl in season one. I wanted to play with that.

Victoria likes to play with fire more than Rachel.

Chloe is...Chloe.

And poor Max is on the verge of being caught in the middle.

Anyways, another chapter down. I'm thinking of doing a Maximum Victory chapter next and we'll go back and forth until the girls are in Seattle. Remember, while the first part of the story was for Amber and Price, the rest of the story is a split so please factor it in before you tell me you want less of one and more the other.

Thank you for reading, and as always for your continued kind words. I always enjoy hearing from you all and if I do not answer it's not that I'm not ungrateful, I'm usually writing and can get so of in a one track mind keeping myself to the steady releases.

Anyways enough of that. Seen you all soon for some Max and Victoria goodness.
Victoria Chase was late and Max could not wait to hold that over her annoyingly punctual new friend.

Standing outside the Variety Theatre, Max paced back and forth, doing her best to ignore the bubbling nervousness she felt as Victoria Chase was now fashionably late. During their first day's hanging out, Victoria tried to text and drive when she thought she was going to be a few minutes' late, and Max admonished her for it. She even had gone full PSA, Saturday morning special and left Victoria obviously annoyed.

But as annoying as it must have been, Victoria had actually listened to her. She no longer texted from the road (at least she did not do that for her) so now, thanks to that little victory, Max was now left in the dark until Victoria actually arrived.

She supposed she was happy she was being safe. Victoria could be very fast and loose about her behaviour on occasion. She did not want to lose Victoria to a car accident like what had happened to William, who was basically like her second Dad in her Arcadia Bay days. Not that she had any right to own any of that loss after all that she had failed to do for Chloe.

Thankfully Max was not alone as she waited. Sitting against the side of the theatre watching the carts pass them by was Kristen Anderson and Fernando Galvez. Both of them were well beyond bored as they seemed to be watching their pacing friend as their only source of entertainment.

Having spent much of the past few weeks with Victoria alone, she had decided it was time for Victoria to take another step into her world and meet her two closest friends. This was probably another factor in her nervousness. Privately, Victoria was very similar to Kristen and Fernando, but this was not private and they were strangers to Victoria. The likelihood that Victoria would slip back into her armour would be very high. It would be up to her to show that there was nothing to be afraid, because despite everything, Victoria was very easily afraid.

Max had noticed it when she had answered Victoria's phone and spoke to that slinky toned girl that had sent a shiver right up her spine. Her name was Rachel, and although the phone marked Rachel as 'Conniving Bitch' instead of her name.

Thinking about it only raised more question: most notable of which was just how was it this girl spoke only about a hundred words to her and Max had not only spilled things Victoria told her but had left Max ready and more than willing to inform her about her own affairs.

As curious as she may have been about this Rachel, it was nothing compared to seeing what a voice on the phone could do to Victoria. She watched as Victoria rush out of the room and speak in a whisper to the other girl about owing her something.

Victoria might have thought it was private, but she wasn't yet properly introduced to Max's nosey side just yet.

Wowser, Victoria was going to hate her when she realized just how actually uncool she must have been.
She couldn't even properly listen to Victoria when Victoria was teaching her Advanced Fashion 101. She was too lost in Victoria's charm and grace to pay attention and now here she was standing in a mixture of Victoria's handpicked white summer slacks and a pink tee, and she just knew Victoria would look at her like she was pathetic or something and that was the last thing she wanted, because Victoria's opinions were important to her in a way she had never really felt before.

It was a pretty strange time to be Max Caulfield, especially when it involved the Victoria. There was a time where the use of 'Maxine' would drive her up the wall if anyone but her parents uttered it. Now she waited in anticipation to hear her name breathed out of Victoria's soft looking, luscious… kissable lips. They tempted her with ideas she had only ever entertained a long time ago.

Would it be so bad if she turned her head in the theatre and kissed her in the dark? A kiss didn't necessarily have to mean anything… Friends kissed all the times. Girls apparently kissed all the time. Why did it have to be misconstrued as something if Max just wanted to lean over and press her lips against Victoria's, or pull back and nibble on Victoria's hand. Maybe it would be okay to allow her hands to roam free over Victoria's tight lithe body. There was a thought brewing. A thrill of sorts which left her feeling a little warm… but what if she could get the normally reserved Victoria to gasp-

"Can't believe you talked us into this movie when Spider-Man is a thing," Fernando complained loudly, breaking Max out of her mental zone.

"Yeah, I was kinda hoping to see The Amazing Spider-Man as well," Kristen agreed. She eyed Max and added. "…but if it means meeting the mysterious Victoria…”

Max ignored the implications. Yes, Kristen was right she had been devoting a lot of time with Victoria, but Victoria and she had a fleeting time together. Victoria would be off to France and heading back to private school out of state by the end of the summer. Then Max would be stuck in the internet friendship with her until they next met.

As for the movie, well… Max would have probably wanted to see Spider-Man as well, but… she might have wanted to impress Victoria and come off as a little more sophisticated as she was. Still, considering that Victoria actually borrowed her old Gameboy Colour and Pokémon Blue then perhaps she wouldn't be adverse to a superhero movie-

Max's mind went blank as coming around the corner was Victoria Chase. She wore a flowing white knee-high summer dress and clutched her purse in one hand, her phone in the other as walked towards Max. Her expression was her 'resting smug face' as Max called it much to Victoria's chagrin. This only lasted until she noticed Max, her lips curved up slightly her cheeks inexplicably turned pink.

"Here she is... you'll both like her…” Max assured them as she turned back to them. "She's very… kinda… she's Victoria….”

Max exhaled and broke off from Kristen and Fernando. It would be easier to pre-introduce them to Victoria before the actual introduction. Kristen could be a bit much and Victoria could be very flighty and defensive if put on the spot. It would inevitably lead to a bloodbath which Kristen would not survive. Tough as she was Victoria would probably run circles around her.

"Hello Victoria," Max greeted her as she approached Victoria. "We'll just pretend you're on time this once."

Clearly ignoring her urge to snap something out that would put Max into a tailspin, Victoria pushed
her lips together instead and smirked again. Victoria stepped forward and consumed the smaller girl into a nearly crushing hug. Through her thin dress and breasts, Max could feel the throbbing in Victoria's chest faintly against hers.

"Hello as well, Maxine… I guess I'm a little late…" Victoria finally spoke over her head.

"Yeah?" Max spoke up, attempting a little levity in the face of this overwhelming sense of closeness she was in. "You mean to tell me that those new-fangled cars get stuck in traffic and there's nothing the rich girl can do about it?"

Victoria pulled back from the hug, but she maintained her tight grip to Max's waist as she examined Max, her head tilted, her mouth still smirking, like she was sort of impressed with her. God, why in the hell did she want to impress Victoria so much, why was she being like this? It was just getting embarrassing now!

"Now you're just being a bitch, but I guess I'll let you have that one…" Victoria simpered out with a strange prissiness. "… and may I ask why are there are a couple of nerds gaping at us?"

Max gave Victoria a small shove on her shoulder and broke out of Victoria's arms. Ignoring the small peculiar disappointment, she rolled her eyes and looked to Kristen and Fernando. Sure enough, Victoria wasn't lying, she was pointing out the truth. The two of them were blatantly staring at them; Fernando had his mouth hanging up slightly.

"Be nice; they aren't nerds, they're my friends…" Max defended her friends from Victoria's observations. They weren't being nerds, they were being total dorks instead. There was a difference.

"Oh, I guess I stand corrected," Victoria sighed as she turned her attention back to Max. "You are, after all, the bastion of cool…"

Victoria gestured to the two of them, a silent prompt to get the introductions underway. With that, Max led Victoria towards Kristen and Fernando, both of them standing up and brushing themselves as they found themselves now in the intense focus of the tall blonde girl. There the four of them stood. Victoria on one side, Kristen and Fernando on the other and Max in the middle, who noticed that Victoria had already grown several shades more colder as she looked at the two people opposite of her.

Max cleared her throat.

"Victoria Chase, these are my friends Kristen Anderson and Fernando Galvez," Max broke the silence as carefully as she could. "Kristen, Fernando, this is Victoria."

Victoria blinked, the challenging expression she wore faded back into a smile as she extended out her hand to them. The smile did not quite put anyone at ease. She might have been making an effort for Max, but she wasn't about to just drop her guard.

"It is nice to meet you both," Victoria addressed the two of them. "Anyone who is besties with Max is a friend of mine."

Kristen and Fernando glanced at each other and Max ignored the small annoyance she felt. She loved her friends, but they were hipsters and hipsters who sometime liked to be kind of mean to people they perceived as plastic. Words like 'besties' was one of their conflict points.

While this might have been the case, the two of them seemed to forego teasing. She hoped it was because they were being nice, but she wouldn't be surprised because Victoria was as tall as
Fernando and didn't hold herself quite like anyone else they would usually tease or make fun of in school.

"It's nice to meet you as well," Fernando was the first one to speak, taking Victoria's hand immediately. "Max has pretty much spent the entire day talking about you."

Victoria arched her brow and glanced over to Max, she felt her face burn up in under a second. It was a hot day; it was not for any other reason. Certainly not because of the way Victoria was looking at her.

"She has?" she almost purred, sending a shiver up Max's spine. "So Max, what are we going to see?"

Happy to take the out she was given, Max smiled to Victoria, giving her a small shove. "It's called Farewell, My Queen," she informed Victoria. "It's about the last days of Marie Antoinette. It's a French language movie, so I was thinking that maybe you would like to practice your French… since you're… you know… leaving."

The smile on Victoria's face faltered somewhat. For the first time since Victoria had told her about her excursion a few weeks ago, Victoria's departure had been brought up between the two of them. She looked almost… bothered by it. Like leaving to the South of France was somehow some sort of burden or something.

Max didn't mind that she would go on the trip…. What she didn't like was what came after that…

"That's really thoughtful of you…" Victoria spoke quietly, her voice was strained. She coughed and added. "…but are your friends interested in it? If there is something else, I wouldn't say no…"

Fernando was ready to give a resounding 'fuck no' to the foreign film, but Kristen nudged him hard in his ribs.

"Yeah, we definitely are interested in this movie! We won't take no for an answer!" Kristen happily announced as she looked from Victoria to Max.

Max smiled to Kristen, grateful for her support and turned back to Victoria - who for the first time since they met - had offered an actually friendly sort of smile for Max's friends; and potentially her new friends as well…

"Well… thank you…" she murmured to Kristen and Fernando before she turned back to Max and added. "Well, lead on Mad Max, I am looking forward to your obviously superior tastes… I wouldn't want us to watch something that might be entertaining, like Spider-Man or something… but, no, let's watch a movie about a mother who gets beheaded for no fucking reason other than guilty by association… but, yay it's a French language movie so we're going to have fun!"

Victoria pushed by Fernando and Kristen, leaving the two of them gaping at Max and Victoria's total bitch flare up. Max sort of grinned at them and followed after Victoria. Max knew better then to take it as an insult. This was to be expected on occasion.

"Mad Max?" Max repeated as she joined the tall blonde again.

Glancing back to her, Victoria nodded. She eyed Max with that smug expression that had sort of really grown on her.

"Your name is surprisingly fun to play with…" Victoria sighed as she opened the door to the
theatre for Max. "... and I wouldn't want to call you Maxine in front of your friends."

Ignoring the wave of nostalgia, Max remained silent as they approached the ticket booth. She would not bring up what it had reminded her. She had such a little amount of time left with Victoria and far too much guilt to dive into right now.

...

...

So... as it turned out, Farewell, My Queen was the gayest movie Max Caulfield had ever seen in theatre... and she let Kristen drag her to a midnight showing of Rocky Horror Picture Show last Halloween.

Now under most circumstances, she'd be fine with that; but here she was sitting next to Victoria Chase, who looked just as lost by the movie's undertones as she was. Neither of them moved as they watched Diane Kruger slink across the screen, tempting poor Léa Seydoux who was her personal reader.

Kristen and Fernando were here... she supposed... she really lost track on them even if they were seated in the row right in front of them. She probably would have questioned it, but she just didn't have the reasoning in her mind working right now. Not as the faint scent of expensive perfume wafted into her mind, kicking the pleasure centres of her brain into overdrive and drowning her brain in dopamine.

Max remained locked in place, glancing out of the corner of her eye as Victoria sat sort of captivated by the period drama unfolding. It would not be hard to imagine her in it as one of the nobles, relegating her every desire and whim to those in her employ but as wild as it might have been to imagine Victoria in period outfits, she liked her here and now.

She didn't know who she was anymore... not now, not as Victoria gently nibbled on a single popcorn kernel as her gaze lingered on Diane and Léa were locked intense conversation which Max could not only could not understand, but the subtitles stopped registering to her. She was in the zone.

This was probably the worst position a girl whom had been spending the past week or two questioning herself to her very core could ever be, and worst yet it was entirely self-inflicted.

The small girl crush she had for Victoria, primarily based upon their shared interest and Victoria's technical brilliance had grown and evolved into something far different, far more serious, and she had tried hard to avoid it whenever possible. But sitting here now with the object of her growing affection in the dark, within hands reach... nothing about this had made sense, but that was perfectly okay to her.

God, she wondered how it was Victoria was always so cool about everything. Max always felt like she was about to lose herself in Victoria's radiance, but Victoria not only could keep her wits about her, but stay crystal clear and focused.

Max rested her head against the back of the chair and stared off at the darkened rood only illuminated by the glare coming off of the screen. Even then without looking at the screen, none of the tension vanished. If the movie distracted her enough to not feel the way her heart pumped in her chest. It felt harder throbbing, her stomach was not much better as it twisted and turned inside of her.
She had always assumed this was a cliché, but it turned out a cliché had to be grounded in reality to become that.

Max turned her attention back to the film and drew a breath. She once again glanced to Victoria again, hoping to steal a glance at her; but she froze as she noticed Victoria was fully aware of her again. All she could do was laugh nervously as she took in just how shy Victoria looked as she averted her eyes back to the screen.

Max focused on the film as well, feeling embarrassed and ashamed that she had laughed and Victoria could have easily misconstrued it as it being a slight against her. God, maybe it was a good thing Victoria was leaving and would probably not see each other until the winter. It would help give her time to forget these stupid feelings that were obviously one-sided. Victoria obviously had no interest and was probably really uncomfortable with this whole set up now.

At least, that was what she thought before she felt a soft hand gently rest on top of hers.

Prying her eyes from the hand resting on hers, Max looked back at Victoria. Victoria wasn't acknowledging what she was doing. She remained focused on the film, but it was so obvious from the way her face looked so conflicted through the light of the projector that something was going on in Victoria as well.

At first she figured it was an accident and now Victoria was just being nice and not moving it out of pity or something. That thought was instantly erased as she felt Victoria's fingers gently part Max's fingers without any resistance and worked themselves into the gaps.

The grip tightened and Max and Victoria were officially holding hands. How… in the hell did this happen?

Still Victoria remained locked on the movie. There was a half-smile resting on her face, like she had done something that she was sort of proud of doing. Max turned away from Victoria and looked up at the film as well. At least long enough to reorganize her thoughts and absorb this new situation she was in.

She wasn't sure what motivated it. Perhaps Victoria's soothing grip on her hand had instilled a sense of confidence. Whatever the case was, Max lifted their hands up and brought her lips to the top of Victoria's hand.

That finally did it. Victoria's focus on the movie was broken, and she turned to face Max properly for the first time. Her eyes were wide and searching Max. It was as though she was looking to see an ulterior motive, or if it was all just a trick Max was playing on her so that she could have something to laugh at with her friends.

It wasn't a trick. Max would never harm Victoria like that, never mishandle her trust… She had learned from her mistakes, and she would never do it again… Not with her.

Max leaned forward, breaking through Victoria's personal space. Victoria did not complain and she made no move away from Max. She sat there, and remained both still and at peace as Max carefully pressed her lips against the corner of Victoria's mouth.

Victoria's scent was an intoxicant and she drew it in directly with the kiss. Max lingered for a moment longer before she pushed her lips against the same spot again, lingering a little longer before she drew back. The realization had hit her and she felt both ashamed for doing it and yearning to push what she did even further. She had to calm down and take baby steps… this was all so very much…
"I'm so sorry..." she started to whisper to her.

Victoria pushed her free hand immediately against Max's mouth. Max obeyed and looked into Victoria's sharp green eyes, still very wide as she registered what had happened. She was not mad or upset. She seemed... content. It was sort of like she had found a peace which wasn't there before. For as short a time as she knew Victoria Chase, that seemed like such a rare treasure for her to have.

"No, Maxine..." Victoria breathed out, her words uncharacteristically stuttering as she shook her head. "Don't you... ever... apologize for that."

Max blinked and nodded wordlessly. Nothing about it was something she would ever regret.

Still clutching onto Max's hand, Victoria leaned her head down and nestled it into her shoulder. Together the two of them settled back in and watched the rest of the film, their growing tension had been sated enough for the time being.

...

...

Maxine Caulfield had kissed her twice, and she had absolutely nothing to answer to it.

Victoria's mind was swimming as she walked Max up towards Max's house. She had dropped Fernando and Kristen off at a Taco Bell to 'get their dinner on' as Kristen put it. Max wasn't feeling it and neither was Victoria, so they all said their goodbyes, the two of them graciously allowing Victoria even more time alone with their friend. She would have to find a way to thank them later.

For now all that she could do was not freak out openly in front of Max, who was currently holding her hand as they made their way up the front door. Thankfully it appeared that both Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield were out of the house, which eased the fear she had of being public in being affectionate with her friend.

Friend... whatever that they were calling it since this afternoon it sure as hell wasn't any sort of friendship she knew of....

As the two of them made it to the door, Max turned back to Victoria. Victoria thought that she would pull back from the grip Victoria had, but she did not. She remained locked in the embrace, her gentle blue eyes looking up at her, radiating right through Victoria as usual. How was it she could be so adorkable and cool at the same time? She always seemed to have it all together.

God damn, the sheer amounts of time she looked at Maxine throughout the movie was embarrassing... perhaps more so when she was finally caught by her. How she could so easily laugh it off like it was all good was astounding.

As they stood there in silence, Victoria exhaled.

"So..." she started the conversation with nothing but her best awkwardness. "...That movie was a lot gayer than I expected..."

Max nodded, she seemed a little embarrassed by it as well. That or she was taking pity on her.

"I swear to Dog I didn't know," Max promised her, her sweet voice a high trill. "Next time I'm going to IMDB it or something."
Victoria arched her brow at the hipster speak which Maxine just had to engage in. She said nothing; the mood didn't feel very ripe for a lot of banter between the two of them over her verbal ticks. Victoria looked down, her eyes averted from the girl. She felt… unworthy to even be here with her… especially with everything that was about to happen… and what she was holding back.

"You know… we haven't really talked much about what's about to happen… me spending August in France, then going to school… " Victoria spoke up, her eyes continued to remain locked away from Max as she ignored the ill feeling brewing inside her. God, she couldn't even say Blackwell.

Maxine inched herself forward, her head twisting and forcing Victoria to look at her properly. She was smiling, like she was not nearly as worried about the future as Victoria was. Why and how, Victoria would never understand. Perhaps it was just all part of the hipster chill she could maintain even now.

It would have certainly explained how she so effortlessly seduced her in the movie…

"You're worried about us just… ending this friendship because we're not going to see each other the rest of the summer?" Maxine softly probed Victoria for an answer.

She might have been curious, but Victoria could hear the obvious hurt she had at the implication. She knew exactly the source for it as well. Everything seemed to fucking find its way back to this Chloe Price debacle… God, she tried to solve it but that bitch Rachel more or less told her to fuck off. What else was she supposed to do, just fucking interfere?

"No… that's… no… I… haven't exactly had a friendship like this is before," Victoria spoke finally, forcing herself to choke back her guilt as she looked at Max. "I have friends and all, but it's always so… mutually beneficial or a matter of maintaining a social standing. I never had anyone who just… lets me be myself… and I don't want this to be some stupid summer thing that is never spoken of again-"

It was Max's turn to bring a silence to Victoria. She pressed a finger against her lips long enough to bring Victoria to a silence.

"Victoria, it's the 21st century. There's such thing as Skype, Face Time, Facebook… a fax machine… whatever your poison is… I'll use it for you," Max lightly teased her, her mouth curving back into a smile. "I know I don't have a good track record… but just because we don't see each other doesn't mean what we have is just… over."

Maxine trailed off as she looked over Victoria. She seemed to look like she had more to say as she squeezed Victoria's fingers.

"You know… you don't have to be worried about the opinions of others," Max pointed out to her. "The Victoria that you are to me doesn't have to be an exclusive thing. You can be a warm and funny and… darkish as you want. Screw anyone who thinks you have to change for them."

Victoria smiled at the thought of her dorking it up at Blackwell. She imagined Being nice to others just because, forgetting the Vortex Club and their soul crushing agenda agendas. With it would inevitably come a properly defined friendship with Amber and Price due to their lack of competing spirit between the three of them.

But that was impossibility now. She couldn't just drop everything she had built because Max naively believed in her. She was not a good person, despite how much Maxine might have believed in her. Her cowardice not telling Maxine what she knew about Price only proved that further.
"What if…" Victoria struggled to say with a steady voice. "What if I just want this Victoria to be only with you?"

Her words seemed to disarm Max and divert her attention. She smiled brightly; Victoria could see Maxine blush at the idea thrown out through the fading sunlight.

"I'll cherish it for sure…" Maxine assured her, still grinning at her.

As they stood there, Victoria watched as the smile Max wore faded into a frown.

"I really wish you didn't have to go… but that would be pretty selfish… Maxine confessed out loud to Victoria, looking sheepish and guilty for having such a thought.

Victoria ignored the tightening in her chest become nearly unbearable. In their silence, she summoned whatever bravery she had and allowed her free hand to reach up and pushed some of Maxine's bangs behind her ear. She watched, eagerly, as Maxine shivered against her touch, her head pushing against the hand nuzzling it.

This was one of those perfect moments she waited for. She could lean in, capture Maxine's lips right now… but she couldn't. Not everyone could be quite as brave as Maxine Caulfield could…

"If there was one person who could convince me not to go…" Victoria murmured to Max. She meant it too. It wasn't an empty platitude, Maxine had the power to say one fucking word and she would tell her parents that she would not go on the trip. She doubted they would have minded too much…

Maxine frowned; she was not upset by what she heard Victoria say, if anything she looked more than a little tempted to take her up on it. There was nothing Victoria wanted more for her to take up the offer… but instead she just sort of shook her head.

"I couldn't do that to you, Victoria. I couldn't make you cancel your plans all because you made a new friend," she finally spoke, her tone low and shy as she finally looked back to her. She shook her head and added. "I'll be fine; I'll be right here waiting for you. In the meantime… make every second count?"

"Absolutely!" Victoria immediately blurted out. She paused, mentally screamed at herself for having no chill and added. "I mean… lots of photo work for us to still do… and stuff…"

Maxine smiled and nodded, she squeezed Victoria's fingers as Victoria pushed back the desire to kiss her. It was unfair that Max got to do it, and she hadn't…

"Yeah, and stuff…" She repeated to Victoria in a sweet-tempered voice. "Would you like to come inside and we can watch something a little less gay? I mean, if you don't have any plans…"

Victoria huffed, her free hand reaching up to rubbed the back of her head. At this point the two of them could binge watch The L Word and Victoria would be thrilled to sit through it so long as Max was there.

"You know you're making it impossible to leave?" Victoria asked her tacitly. She watched mesmerized as Max's small smile widened before her eyes.

"Good, then my plan is working!" she cheekily replied. "How about we watch The Fifth Element?"

Victoria rolled her eyes. Of course that would be her selection for this evening's follow-up.
"Why am I not surprised you'd want to watch that?" Victoria droned out, attempting to pretend that she was apathetic, when she was actually a little excited. Milla Jovovich was top notch in that flick.

"It's a French directed movie too," Max pointed out, laughing merrily at Victoria's attempt to look unimpressed. "You know I think you would look good with dyed hair… not Leeloo orange… but maybe… blue? Obviously you would have to brown your hair first or it would turn gree-"

Victoria cupped her hand right over Max's mouth, forcing her to be silent. At least that was what it was intended to do. Max broke out with a muffled laugh as she weakly attempted to break Victoria's grasp so that she did not go into detail about shit that reminded her of Chloe Price.

She inched a little closer as she released Max's hand and instead wrapped it around her waist.

"Let's go in... before I decide to book an earlier flight, okay?" Victoria suggested to Maxine, her words dripping with sarcasm.

As Victoria pulled her hand away she found Max was smiling. Silently she nodded, and grabbing onto Victoria's hand, she opened the front door and dragged her friend indoors for another night of comfortable –and undoubtedly cosier due to this afternoon – fun.

Chapter End Notes

Oh you girls and your assumptions about who is smoother.

Thanks you as usual to your kind words and continued following. I hope you enjoyed this so far. Perhaps a little less creepy as last chapter was, but I assure you, last chapter has not been forgotten. Method to my madness and all that.
Stepping out of the taxi cab, Rachel leaned back inside of the car and swiped her debit card over the driver's card reader momentarily before slamming the door behind her, joining Chloe on the street corner. As she joined Chloe, Rachel looked up at the girl who seemed to be taking in their surrounding with a mixture of weariness and anticipation.

They made it to Portland. Finally.

This was a good and bad thing. Good that they made it after so long of the two of them skipping from county to county, but it was bad under the circumstances in which they got there. The engine seized up 40 minutes out of Portland and it was beyond Chloe's ability to fix. So they tow-trucked it to a shop on the outskirts of the city, where Chloe and the mechanic spoke at length about what the fuck was going on without Rachel understand much other than they were speaking English still.

With the proverbial dick measuring over and done with, the girls got a time and cost estimate of about a day a three digit cost and the recommendation of a Café to get a bite to eat; they took all the shit that they would need and taxied into the city, undeterred from reaching their goal in the face of the downturn in their luck. The two of them laughed and flirted all the way into the city. Neither of them were about to let that bullshit drag them down. They were having too good a fucking time.

"So," Rachel spoke as they walked slowly together as they took in the neighbourhood feel of the district "First time in a big city?"

Chloe's vengeance fuelled response came swiftly to Rachel; she reached out and yanked on Rachel's ponytail, making her yelp and hop forward, earning one or two looks from passer-by's directed to the obvious newcomers to their city.

"Dick!" Rachel announced to her, scowling as she rubbed the back of her head.

"Bitchface!" Chloe snapped right back. "I'm a small town hick, but I'm not that much of a hick."

The two of them laughed and Rachel pushed herself back into Chloe's side, her fingers folded into hers. Together they walked in silence. They had long since evolved past the need to fill the silence in with words at all the time. There was a comfort now in their shared silence… well… so long as the two of them were not fighting over something silly. Leos and Pieces had to be constantly in communication. They'd destroy each other if they didn't.

God, everything felt so… right again since they had that little ritualistic bloodletting. Call her dramatic, you could call her whatever you wished, it was just something that had to be done. After acknowledging what she was (she still refused the label) and the limitations that came with that, she just needed a serious 'fuck you' to that.

It was a little extreme perhaps, and she hoped Chloe wasn't hurting too much from it still. She knew for sure that her hand was still throbbing from the pain, but it was so worth it to her. Everything just felt… different between them. It was like it was actually real now; like nothing
could stand in their way anymore. That two damaged souls coming together as one theory she had when they were younger… it felt securely bonded now. When she looked to Chloe, all she could see was her better half, and it made all the hurt, all the little bouts of sadness that caught her off guard just go away.

She had always felt this way with Chloe, but now it was different. Now it was Like Chloe Price was actually her wife…

As Rachel mused about the implications of all of this, it wasn’t long before the two of them found Dahlia’s, the café which the mechanic had recommended because his sister had worked there once. It had a very low key feel on the exterior… sort of like The Two Whales, only much more aesthetically pleasing. It was simple brick and mortar, no tacky billboards, just a name on a side of the building.

Was it… strange that she sort of missed the diner? Probably just the staff though… her Mom… even Joyce… Goddammit, if she was getting homesick for fucking Arcadia Bay.

Perhaps they just had to keep moving. Keep the momentum of their journey going and push this stupid feeling side. Perhaps they would only stay in Portland for as short amount of time as possible. Long enough to get their body art completed. Then they’d push north, get to Seattle. If Victoria was still in the city perhaps they take her up on the offer she made. It would be kind of nice to see how the rich lived, even if it meant hanging out with fucking Icky Vicky.

After that, then came Max Caulfield; and holy fuck what a mess that was going to be. Rachel had half a mind to find out what she could about Max Caulfield. Get her email or phone number and warn her about the impending visit. So that she didn't say some shitty thing to Chloe or something. Honestly she had no idea what to expect and she tried to ignore the small inkling of conflict that rose to her chest every time she thought about the girl.

She had brought Chloe so much joy and her silence, so much pain. Even after years of endless Max Caulfield stories, and years of watching Chloe smile and laugh, and just when she fell silent unvoiced, but obvious hurt would drown her and there was not one fucking thing Rachel could do to fix it. It was like Max Caulfield and William Price were two pieces missing from her heart, and no matter what Rachel did or said, there was just nothing that could fix it. She reckoned Chloe had to deal with it as well though with what happened to her Mom.

But here they were a week stay and three and a half hour drive north and perhaps Chloe could have a piece of her heart returned to her. So this discomfort would be worth it. Chloe… Chloe deserved only the fucking best in this world after spending so long getting shit on; and Rachel was absolutely determined to make sure that she would receive that. No matter the cost…

Rachel pushed all that aside as Chloe opened the door and held it for her like she was chivalrous or something, which was the last word she’d use to describe her girl… she was more like a swashbuckling Westley from Princess Bride type than anything.

Rachel thoughts on Chloe came to a screeching halt as she took a look around. The first thing she noticed was how… gay everything was. The customers consisted primarily of women of varying degrees of femininity. Most of them appeared to be the hipster vegan types who looked up with a mixture of curiosity and distain at the two outsiders that were intruding into their space.

She probably should have guessed by how gay friend looking Burnside Triangle district was that Chloe and she had been directed to the hub of Portland gayness by that dickbag mechanic. Jesus fucking Christ were the two of them really that obvious to even a random fucking guy? Why did everyone just sort of assume two girls out on the road made them obviously gay?
Rachel would have to blame Thelma and Louise for this one.

"What the shit… That prick sent us to a hipster coffee shop!" Chloe announced next to her.

Rachel ran her hand over her face and looked to Chloe, who had clearly not realized yet just where in the hell they actually were.

"Look around, Chloe…” Rachel answered her girlfriend… wife… whatever. "…I'm fairly certain this goes well beyond a hipster café."

Even with the massive nudge, the head nod to the material on the wall and the verbal cue it took another moment or two before Chloe fully registered that they were in the middle of the largest gay communities in Oregon. The two of them had spent so long in a small town (with exception to Steph and a few obvious closet cases) that they had gotten more or less used to being viewed as different and that what they did wasn't exactly something to be advertising openly.

So… perhaps this was a culture shock… whatever… they would have to just adapt.

Approaching them was a Barista approaching middle age. She was thin, short brunette woman, her hair tied back. The lines on her forehead said that she had lived a hard long life; but that wasn't what interested Rachel. What interested Rachel and Chloe was the absolutely intricate tattooing she possessed. Each arm was sleeved all the way up to her neck.

As they shared a look, the girls knew that they would have to ask to see if it was a local artist. Off chance, but fuck it…might as well.

"Hello I'm Dahlia," the woman introduced herself as she retrieved her pen and pad. "Here or to go?"

Dahlia the barista had turned out to be the owner of the place. She looked expectedly at the two girls in a manner not dissimilar to that of Joyce whenever they were harassing their Moms at The Two Whales. It must have just been a service industry look.

"Here… but first you can tell us where it was that you got your work done," Rachel replied for the two of them as she gestured to the art on the woman's body. "Is it local? We've been interested in getting some work done for quite some time now."

The woman stared at the two of them wearily. Yes, now this was like getting a dirty look from a much gayer Joyce alright.

"You want to mark up that baby skin of yours?" she said, looking at the two of them incredulously. "Girls, do yourself a favour and take an old woman's advice: order something here and don't get tats.

Rachel and Chloe did not protest or speak even. They just stood there, silently staring at the woman trying to impede on their poor life choices as though she had any right to.

"Fine, it's not like my experiences count for anything for you little girls," she said resignedly as she wrote down an address on her notepad. "Ask for Karina Andressen, tell her Dahlia sent you and she'll treat you decently. Come on you love birds, let's get you seated."

The owner handed the piece of paper over to Rachel, who pocketed it immediately. Rachel exhaled at the last comment and took Chloe's hand; together they followed Dahlia to their table.

...
With her breakfast only consisting of two cups of coffee and a bowl of fruit salad (the only thing on the goddamn menu that looked edible) Chloe Price felt her stomach grumble as Rachel and her entered Brand 94. When they were done speaking to this Karina the Tattooist, she would have to con Rachel in hitting up a Sonic's or somewhere that didn't think vegan food was somehow a suitable substitute to actual food.

Until her hunger was sated, she would have to distract herself with looking around at the wall hangings in the tattooist parlour consisting primarily of past work the tattooist had done. It was all a brilliant collage of colour and design. Chloe looked to Rachel and notice too appeared entranced by the work. It looked as though the two of them had found their artist.

They were about to sit down when the back doors opened, a burst of Alice In Chains rocketed through the girls ears as out stepped a woman wearing a tank top and jeans with blonde hair and jet black highlights streaking through. Strangely enough she did not have any tattoos at all, well at least none that they could see. It sort of ran contrary to the image of a tattoo artist, but whatever…

Rachel glanced to Chloe for a moment before she stepped forward to the woman who was looking at the two of them, her phone in one hand, a pack of cigarettes in the other.

"Hi," Rachel started, her confident smile returning to her face as she stepped forward to the woman. "We're looked for a Karina Andressen?"

The woman squinted at Rachel for a moment before directing her hard dark eyes to Chloe as she too stepped forward and joined Rachel.

"You got her," the woman named Karina Andressen answered curtly; there was a strange accent in her voice which Chloe could not quite guess.

Rachel smiled a little wider as she went into… well… full Rachel mode.

"Hi," she repeated as she laced her fingers together out in front of her. "We're looking to book a fairly heavy job for you. We saw your work on Dahlia and wanted to see if you'd be the right fit."

Karina the tattooist narrowed her eyes at the two girls. Apparently she was not a particularly big fan of being ordained as good enough by Rachel. Chloe shifted in place next to her girlfriend. Sometime Rachel needed to come down from that perch… especially around strangers.

"The right fit…" Karina repeated plainly, her voice nearly amused by Rachel's attempt to assert herself. "You know I got a call about two baby lesbians raising a stir, and I just fucking knew I had to get you in as clients… talk about a bad run of luck, hey?"

Rachel and Chloe shared a look of confusion.

"Dahlia called you about us?" Chloe spoke up finally, earning a sharp look from the older woman, who nodded.

"It's a small community, word travels fast about newcomers," she explained. The Tattooist paused and sighed, adding. "Well, that, and she's my goddamn wife trying to drum me up some business."

As Rachel and Chloe shared a look at the revelation about Karina's marital status, the woman set her phone down on the counter and finally stepped forward to join her potential new clients. She looked between the two of them inquisitively, sort of like she was attempting to figure them out.
"Is this your first time in a community of like-minded individuals?" she finally asked, a small grin crossing onto her mouth as it became so obvious. "You two got the small town, baby lipstick lesbian vibe going on, and yes you too, Blue," she added before Chloe could protest. "Pretend to be the whole 'Look at me, I'm so punk and androgynous! I'm special!' all you like, Blue but you're girly as fuck compared to a lot of people who you think you fall into. I mean, you obviously don't bathe, but... you shave... you're wearing makeup... and I'm sure this cutie is kind of happy for that."

Biting her lip, Chloe glanced to Rachel, who looked like she wanted nothing better than to laugh, but couldn't out of respect. Still, she was shaking as she struggled to remain in control.

"She's..." Rachel started, struggling with keeping her tone neutral. "She might be right about you. Just a little though... totally not dead on or anything... Did I mention that I love you, yet?"

"Shut up," Chloe snapped, nudging Rachel before turning back to the Tattooist who had turned away to walk to the nearest seat. "...and it's not Blue, It's Chloe Price."

Karina waved her hand behind her head at the two of them dismissively. It was obvious that she was not in a particularly caring mood right now. Chloe reckoned they were sort of interfering with her smoke break. That would probably piss her off as well.

"Yeah sure thing, Blue," the woman said as she sat down and refocused on the girls. "Don't look so smug about what I said. I'll be making fun of you next... and you are?"

"My name is Rachel Price," Rachel answered without batting an eyelash. "Mrs. Rachel Price."

Chloe's heart twisted inside of her chest as she heard Rachel's declaration. It became suddenly impossible to breathe. She looked at Rachel, as if she needed a confirmation. Rachel however remained locked in her stare at the tattoo artist, who looked bemused herself at the declaration Rachel at made. There was a pink tinge on her cheeks, as though she had meant it, but perhaps only at this moment had understood the full ramifications of her words.

The blood thing, the words she had spoken on the railway bridge... she had meant. She had meant all of it; and now here Rachel stood, a Price in all but legal recognition. Rachel Amber... the newest Price woman... fuck it was going to take some time for Chloe to wrap her mind around this.

"Married..." Karina broke through the silence as she looked at Chloe for a moment before shaking her head. "Jesus, you two are babies... fucking kids these days... so fast to grow up... Dahlia and I were in our thirties before that conversation even got going..."

Rubbing her face, Karina leaned forward, resting her hand on her chin as she looked up at the two of them. As far as she was aware, they both were a properly married couple.

"So, you liked my work..." she went on, gesturing towards all of the art spread out across the walls of the parlour. "Do you have any ideas what you want? And just for the record, if you so much as browse that fucking sample book, I'm booting your ass out. I don't need to be doing yet-fucking-another barbed wire tattoo or Chinese symbols. You have an original idea or we're not working today."

As the Tattooist patted the spot next to her on the waiting room couch, Rachel stepped forward and took a seat as though she owned the place. Chloe lingered, but stepped forwards towards them. The pouch bag she had brought along weighing heavily against her side.

"Yeah... Chloe and I have been doodling..." Rachel started before shutting up. She clamped her
mouth shut for a moment before she amended herself by adding, "Well, what I mean is that my wife has been drawing out and I've been dictating what we wanted to do for the past few years… Babe, could you show her?"

Wordlessly, Chloe reached into her bag and grabbed her old journal detailing all of the work the two of them had spent the past few years designing. Rachel's choices were relatively simple, but Chloe had wanted a sleeve, and after a couple consultations with Sera, the two of them figured out the perfect design. Flowers and skulls… butterflies… death, life and a beauty which was fragile and fleeting. Everything the two of them ever seen, brought together in a single image.

At least that was Rachel thoughts on the art they created. Chloe just thought it was cool as shit to look at.

" Already taking credit for your wife's work?" Karina observed as she snatched the journal from out of Chloe's hands. "Wow, you're really are a married couple, my condolences Blue…"

The woman fell silent as she quietly scrolled through page after page, examining the work Chloe had spent years sketching out and evolving as she grew more confident. The base annoyance the Tattooist wore for her potential clients vanished. She became much more thoughtful, perhaps even sort of impressed by what she was looking at.

"Shit kid…" she breathed as she looked back up to Chloe. "You did this?"

Chloe rubbed the back of her neck. It really wasn't anything that special. It wasn't much better than the shit she tagged back home.

"Yeah… they're just stupid little scribbles…" she attempted to deflect the praise.

"Stop with the fucking modesty," Karina interjected over Chloe's attempt. "Are you still in school?"

Chloe looked away from the impressed Tattooist and attempted to focus on Rachel, who had crossed one leg over the other. Like Karina, she too was looking at Chloe as well, but there was an uncomfortable level of pride radiating out of her demeanour. Rachel's pride always made Chloe breathless even now.

"Yeah… never really took any art classes," Chloe shrugged as she looked away from the two pairs of eyes staring up at her. "Kinda more interested in science once upon a time so I didn't focus on that too much when I was young. Now I'm just banging through school so I get it done faster. Start our lives proper, you know?"

Karina nodded thoughtfully as she thankfully directed her eyes back to the improvised art in her hands. She may have looked away, but Rachel hadn't. Her mouth moved upwards into an adorable little smile just for her. It was the sort of look at that made Chloe want to take Rachel back to the truck or the place they had rented out and do all the unspeakable things.

Chloe silenced her desires and plans as Karina closed the art book and looked up to Chloe once again. She nodded in apparent approval.

"Well, when you go back to school, you should take some art classes. You got serious raw fucking talent there, Blue," she suggested as she leaned back into her seat and passed the book over to Rachel. "If you sharpen this skill, you bring your ass back to me in a year or two and I'll teach your how to use the Tattoo machine. Then you can go out into the world, spreading your art and those drunken mistakes to the masses."

Chloe exhaled and allowed a small shy grin to spread over her face at the flattering offer the
woman had just made her. She hadn't really thought about her future beyond sharing it with Rachel. Now an offer had been extended… and it was an interesting one. It was something which in spite of her artist's end game, she never really considered until right now. She supposed she had to talk it over with someone in the trade to get the idea.

"You think so?" she asked, feeling a little struck in spite of her attempt to remain cool.

"You know for a punk girl, you really are insecure," Karina pointed out, a smirk forming on her face. "Did I fucking stutter? You can also be an artist or whatever, but you should have a trade to pay the bills. Something about that Princess wife of yours screams 'Look at me, I'm expensive!'"

The tension broke in Chloe; she could not help but laugh as the opposite was true. All of this was paid for by Rachel, not her. She was the expensive one…the burden in this relationship, and she really ought to have been doing more to pull her weight. Rachel could say she did not, mind, but Chloe did.

As though she could read just the sort of tangent Chloe was veering off into, Rachel reached up, her hand taking Chloe's. It was a silent reminder that this wasn't something which Chloe had to get worked up into a frenzy, which she had done on more than one occasion.

She just… She just didn't like the idea of being useless in this relationship beyond moral support.

"So if this sleeve for you, Blue; I'm thinking we start right away," Karina spoke up as she opened the book once again. "We can do this in three parts over a few weeks… and what does the missus want?"

"We're only here for a week, we'll deal with the pain," Rachel countermanded the woman's leisurely approach as she reached over and turned the page. "… I want that hella rad dragon on my right calf. I want that star... right here..."

Rachel gestured from the page to her inside of her left wrist, which was where she wanted her second piece of work done. As Karina nodded, Rachel glanced up to Chloe and smiled before she twisted herself properly to face the woman. She held out her right wrist, and pushed back the bracelets and Dad's watch to reveal the long jagged scars. She reached into her short pockets and produced a piece of paper filled with her drawings.

"I was thinking both the Leo and a Pisces astronomical symbols intertwined on my wrist, covering up this scar tissue if you can," she said as she handed over the paper to Karina with a small smirk, she added. "As you can see, the Leo is fucking the Pisces... well... to pièces..."

As Karina looked away from Rachel, she turned to face Chloe. The heat rose back to Chloe's face as the woman looked somewhat impressed by the growing sexual tension between the two girls in her shop.

"I'm assuming she's the Leo?" she guessed, pointing to Rachel as Rachel produces a second piece of paper. It was just as crumpled as the first note she presented.

…and I've been designing this," Rachel added as Karina took it. "It's not as good as Chloe's work… but…"

She trailed off as Karina inspected it, her brow arching as she looked up and inspected Rachel curiously. Chloe stepped forward, her hand extended out to the tattooist. She needed to see this for herself. Karina passed the piece of paper up to her and quietly, Chloe took in the drawing Rachel had done.
There on the paper was a rough human outline, the back facing the observer. Running from its left hip were three spiny stems, covered in thorns. It was a rose stem streaming up Rachel's back and ending at the base of her neck. It had no flower head; it just sort of ended, as though going back into the way through her spine.

Chloe looked to Rachel, who stared straight ahead. Her mouth was pushed together as she appeared to struggle to remain straight faced in the midst of her growing grief. Rachel had talked about getting work done to honour Rose… but Chloe did not think it would be this extensive.

Finally Rachel looked up; she could no longer hide the tears building up in her beautiful hazel eyes. They were eyes which had shed far too many tears in her short life.

"Mom was a gardener, and I am one of the Roses she bloomed…” Rachel softly justified to Chloe. "…and I thought…”

Ignoring the fact that a virtual stranger was watching this all unfold, Chloe reached out and pulled Rachel into her arms. Rachel remained silent, aloof even as she clutched onto Chloe's back. As the girls hugged, Karina stood up, stone face and clearly uncomfortable being in the same room as the two of them, especially without any details to understand the context to any of this.

"Okay… I think I can get the Dragon done in one session, how about we do that on the second session with Blue. We'll finish our work with your Rose stem," she suggested, to the two of them. "Today I can bang out that star and the Zodiac fuckfest for you, then Blue's sleeve underway. Sound cool?"

Rachel snapped herself out of her state. She looked over to Karina and emitted a watery smile at her attempt to elicit some humour out of the awkwardness that formed from this.

"Hella cool," Rachel replied as she released Chloe. "Well, let's get this going!"

Karina sighed as she grabbed her phone. Shaking her head, she backed away towards the front door.

"God damn, you girls are in for a world of pain," she warned the two of them. "Alright, we'll discuss payment after I have a smoke, you two go on in back and settle in. I don't keep cash on the premises, so don't, like, rip me off or anything…"

Gesturing to the open door on the opposite side of the room, Karina gave them a smile and left, leaving Chloe alone with Rachel; her smoke break seemed to evolve into giving the two of them a little space, which as Rachel collapsed back into Chloe's arms, Chloe was glad to have received that small mercy from the shop owner.

"Look at you... Mrs. Price," Chloe spoke, resting her chin on the top of Rachel's head. "Being all hardcore and shit… you know you might end up giving Joyce a run for her money someday."

Rachel pulled her head back and kissed Chloe's chin.

"I thought I would give it a test drive," Rachel answered coyly as she tilted her head at Chloe. "If your Mom is going to take the Madsen name, then someone has to replace her. There should always be two proper, unblemished Mrs. Price's. And your Dad… your Dad deserves to have his name carried on through by both of us."

"What about your Dad? You don't think he wouldn't want his name carried on?" Chloe asked her.

"Chloe Amber has kinda a nice ring to it. What about a hyphen? Price-Amber… Amber-Price? Amber-Price… Jesus Christ, that sounds like an internet shipping term fan girl's use. Ugh,
never fucking mind."

As Chloe rolled her eyes at the idea of people shipping them, and that Max Caulfield had fucking introduced her to shipping in the first place, Rachel reached up and placed her hands on each side of Chloe's face.

"Amber... Price... Price-Amber or Amber-Price..." Rachel listed with a shrug of her shoulders. "It doesn't matter to me, so long you're mine."

Eyeing Rachel for a moment, Chloe smiled and leaned into to press her lips against her blood wife's. It really didn't matter either. All that mattered was that they were here together, checking off another promise they had made to each other.

Rachel pulled herself out of Chloe's arms, her hand reaching out and onto Chloe's.

"Now come along, Mrs. Amber," Rachel said to her playfully. "Let's go and do something hella fucking stupid!"

Chloe smirked as the new surname experiment rolled of the tip of Rachel's tongue as Rachel walked the two of them towards the back room. Today was a good day to spend in enjoyable agony.

Chapter End Notes

People shipping Rachel and Chloe. God, what an impossible thing to imagine.

Thanks as always for reading, and your kind words. I'm glad that to see that the Maximum Victory I'm writing appears to be a success (I hope). Next Chapter will, of course, be a Victoria and Max Chapter. Now that they are designated hand holding friends, the sky is the limit!

Well, as far as Max and Victoria's struggling with their gayness is the limits. Whatever. More fun incoming, and I'll see you when I see you (3-4 days maybe 2 since writing these dorks is a nice change of pace.)
As cliché as it was to say the phrase *Cheshire cat grin*, it was the only description which Victoria Chase could describe Maxine Caulfield whenever she got the look on her face she was currently emoting.

That grin screamed to Victoria that the world had to watch out because Maxine had plans on her mind and inevitably those plans would somehow involve her, which she would drag her feet on but no matter what her protest, she would cave to whatever Caulfield had on her mind, because she was far too sweet to ever deny her anything short of criminal.

Well… maybe. Max never asked her to kill a guy yet so Victoria couldn't definitively give an answer to whether or not she would. She'd like to say she wouldn't, but honestly she couldn't say that.

Pushing aside the theoretical questions she held about how her morality was tied to the whims of the girl sitting next to her on Max's bed, Victoria directed her attention back to catching her 27th Slowpoke in *Pokémon Blue*. It wasn't her fault really, she was going through the Seafoam Islands and every fucking time one jumped on the screen, she just had to fucking catch it. At this point she didn't know what in the fuck she was doing anymore.

Next to her, of course, was Maxine Caulfield. She was currently watching *Friday the 13th: Jason Takes Manhattan* because of course she fucking was. But much more thrilling to her was the little face that she was snuggled right up next Victoria, her head using her lap as a pillow and fuck, Victoria was glad that she wore slacks today and forewent her original plan to wear a skirt.

All of this… well, it was a new unspoken development since they went to the movies. Neither of them addressed the fact that Maxine had kissed her, or that Victoria held her hand through most of the move and the rest of that day. They just sort of… went with it. Playing things by ear, both of them seemingly too scared to define whatever the fuck was going on between them. All that Victoria knew for sure was that she didn't want to go back to what they were before. It was nice to have a friend, but it was much nicer to have… this sort of friendship.

So there they sat, in some sort of gay limbo as Victoria tried her best not to start petting Maxine's head like a cat (Hence why she was probably so devoted to playing *Pokémon*) as thoughts about the one sided kisses she received once again seeped into her thoughts, and just how it was she was going to answer it, and more importantly, could she answer it?

She wasn't… brave. Even now with a beautiful girl using her as a pillow, her hormones raging and wanting nothing better than to pin Max down and kiss her, it was just hard to just… *accept* that she had these feelings in the first place.

No one taught her to fear this sort of orientation, but she spent a full month attacking a couple gay girls at every opportunity because she was Victoria Chase and they were her enemy so she went for the throat. As much as she hated to admit it, Price was right about her and she had spent such a long time pretending everything was fine and that she was just a normal girl despite never.
"So, I've been thinking…"

Victoria decided against saying anything snappy. She instead saved the game and turned the Game Boy off and dropped it at her side. As if on cue thanks to her lack of distraction, her hand immediately fell on top of Maxine's head, her fingers pushing between her soft chestnut locks as she stroked her hand through her hair.

She felt Maxine stir and exhale sharply as she seemed to nestle in place. Victoria would have done a small victory dance as she noticed the brunette's hand grip onto the bed sheet. Fuck, she was going to have yet another thing to thank Chloe and Rachel for. Pretending to be as sleep as she listened to Rachel and Chloe talk about heavy shit while they pet her like a cat really caught her off guard with how nice it was, and to see Max react like this… was just as, if not even more nice.

"I… I was thinking that since we started hanging out, you have more or less made yourself at home here," Maxine pressed on, a small stutter in her tone. "I mean the great Victoria Chase slumming it with middle class folks is astounding, but I think it's time I get to see how the other half lives."

Victoria halted her hand for a moment before she continued again, as her mind started racing with the idea that Maxine had. She would not deny that bringing Maxine home with her was not something she didn't want. It was perhaps her greatest wish right now… taking her up to her bed room… laying her out on her bed. Perhaps engage in that kiss which she was struggling to find a perfect time and place for… Together they could push the boundaries as far as Maxine was willing to explore.

As much as she wanted this, the desires were dampened by the simple fact that with Maxine at her home, it meant it would come with the inevitable… meeting. Something had wanted to push to another time… preferably never.

"You want to… come over to my place…" Victoria repeated above Maxine, attempting to hide her nerves.

Max did not move her head as Victoria continued to stroke her hair. She seemed almost worried that if she moved she would spook Victoria into stopping. As though that would ever happen; the feeling of Max's heart beating against her thigh was intoxicating. She watched, longingly, as Max's hand tightened and released on the sheets.

Fuck, the things she would do to the world to get to make such a begin gesture so much more lurid.

"I do want that," Maxine confirmed, her voice soft, almost shy. "I would like to see just how they managed to produce such a snobby, elitist, egotistically stuck-up, but extraordinarily sweet daughter."

Victoria bristled under Maxine's teasing. She always found the right combination of detractions to make her blush, or twist her up into such a state that the war of words would be on. If it was anyone else but her, she would probably destroyed the person, or at least fought to the bitter end to do so. With Max, Victoria had learned to temper the instinct to attack and kill at the smallest criticism or comment.

"No… you don't really want that," Victoria corrected Maxine's mistake. "You just think you do, but trust me meeting them is not going to paint you a clearer picture."

Disappointment which crept into Victoria as Maxine pushed herself off of Victoria washed away quickly as the girl in question crawled fucking nearly on top of her. She wasn't sitting, instead her legs were spread out over Victoria's frame and resting on each side of the bed. She pushed her face
close… much, much too close for it to be a platonic thing.

Did Maxine understand what she was doing to her? Fuck, she hoped she didn't. If this as all just a deliberate thing specially designed to turn on Victoria, it fucking worked.

"You do know how reverse Psychology works, right?" Maxine breathed, lips achingly close to hers ad tilted as her head was. "You say no to me and and I'll just want it even more…"

Victoria's felt all her senses and resolve slip from out of her tight grasp as she stared up at Maxine. It would be so easy to just lean, kiss her and change their blossoming friendship into something different all together.

But she couldn't. As it turned out, not everyone could be as brave as Maxine Caulfield.

"W-what would you like from me?" she asked, daring to hope that perhaps Maxine could do the work for her. If Maxine just asked for a kiss, it would be all that she would need to be able to do it.

But life was never that convenient.

"How about a sleepover at your place tonight instead of here?" she instead asked "I won't embarrass you or anything… unless I'm not exactly what your parents would want you to be friends with. I just… you know about me far more than I know about you."

Victoria pressed her hand against Maxine's mouth in order to silence her foolish train of thought. She might have had her problems with her parents, but she doubted very much that they would up and tell her that she was not allowed to be friends with Maxine. They didn't need to lord wealth when they were awful in their own unique way.

As Victoria pulled her fingers away from Maxine's lips, she took in the radiant smile the brunette possessed.

"Please Victoria?" She urged her gently. "…for me?"

As Victoria took in Maxine's adorable, will shattering little smile, she closed her eyes and exhaled loudly.

*Un-fucking-believable.*

…

Max smiled as Victoria pulled up the long winding drive way leading to her massive manor home. It was sort of a startling thing to see just how much pull she could have on someone else.

It was a power which she would attempt to not abuse; with great power comes great responsibility and all that.

Victoria, as it turned out lived on Mercer Island. There was rich, like… wealthy, which Max had expected, but then there was Western Mercer Island rich which she hadn't anticipated. Sitting there in the passenger seat as they waited for their gated home only drove the point home even further that she was entering a world extremely foreign to her own.

The entire time they drove from Max's to Victoria's, Victoria had spent the time chattering away
nervously. Her only focus seemed to be dedicated to bringing Max up to date on her parents so that there wasn't a lot of 'dealing with their complicated shit' as she put it.

Damien Chase – Victoria's father- was a corporate raider in the late 1980's to mid 1990's and made a ton of money breaking up companies and crushing little people for the pay. He was good at it… obscenely good at it, and was noted for his particularly ruthless nature. He would destroy people's livelihoods with a single fax and then go to a charity function a day later and make up for his action like he had been just washing his hands. Nothing fazed him about his activities. It was all just a game where at the end of the day he was going to win and he was going to get paid for it.

Damien wasn't always like this though. It was something he just became without batting an eyelash. He was born dirt poor in the Rust Belt and after watching his mother break at the news of the death of his eldest brother in Vietnam, he swore that he would never continue the cycle started two generations prior; decaying away clinging onto the old values of honour, humility and respect for others… getting stepped on by everyone and dying for a country that didn't give a fuck about him.

So Damien - again according to Victoria - seemed to have modelled his rise after that old Peter Gabriel song 'Big Time' and was ambitious enough to achieve it. So when he turned 18 and was given the fabulous choice of working in the dying manufacturing industry or the Army, Damien chose option Three. He bolted and never looked back; the only thing he took with him was the thousand dollars he saved, the cloths on his back and years of built up rage and humiliation in his heart.

Max imagined that if you were to spend your entire life watching your parents and grandparents get humiliated at every turn, you learned how to do it better and with far more lucrative results; and from Victoria's stories, that was what motivated his quick transfer from investor to a destroyer; and by the time he was in his mid-twenties he had a seven figure personal bank account and constantly growing. All of it made off the backs of the unfortunate wretches who trusted their futures to a shark.

The day was August 17th, 1994 when he had a revelation. He was minding his own business, crushing companies like the morally bankrupt cut throat he was… and then he met Sienna Halford and everything just changed.

Sienna Halford was a socialite from a wealthy family, running her life contrary to Damien. Victoria called it 'story book nonsense that came true'. Uninterested in wealth, she directed her attention to modelling, art, activism for the marginalized. They had met at a gallery showing, a charity auction for HIV/AIDS during the apex of the crisis.

One encounter at a gallery and Damien just… started to lose the desire to keep up his work. By the time the two of them decided to get married, Damien liquidized his assets and started fresh with Sienna. Now they did whatever they wanted. Their latest venture was running a gallery. A far cry from the old days, but from the way Victoria spoke about her Dad… it was sort of as though she figured who he was, was still in there waiting to come out.

If children emulated their parents, then Max could only imagine the struggle going on in Victoria between these two. On top of that were Victoria's desires to just be her own person and trying to juggle whatever she thought she had to be and who she wanted to be.

As Max was about to open the door, she found that it had already been opened for her by Victoria. Victoria refused to acknowledge the pink tinge blooming over her face. Max smiled and was about to reach over and take her hand when the front doors to the manor home opened and out stepped a man in a tuxedo and a woman in an elegant black cocktail dress. They were both tall and
blonde, and they both paused for a moment as they noticed their daughter was not alone. Victoria batted Max's hand away; her expression flickered to an apologetic one.

"You're home early, and I see you brought a friend," the man known as Damien Chase was the first to speak.

As Victoria and Max walked towards the house, Victoria's parents walked towards the waiting Bentley luxury car and somewhere in the middle the two of them met up. Both the father and the mother appeared to be grinning as though they were amused to see that Victoria had brought someone home. Apparently it had to have been a rarity.

As both parties came to a stop, Damien extended his hand out to Max.

"Damien Chase," he introduced himself to Max without a pause. "And you must be Maxine Caulfield. Or is it Max? Victoria here seems to be of two minds about the name choice."

Max glanced up to Victoria, who had gone from pink to red as her father seemed to be toying with the two of them. Max could not help but smile at Victoria, who continued to stare ahead of her parents. She remained locked on the doors behind them.

"She is?" She inquired coyly as she let go of the father's hand.

Next to Damien, Victoria's mother nodded, confirming her husband's assessment. Both of them appeared to be amused that Max was already in on the 'annoy Victoria' game they played.

"If she's annoyed with you, which usually only if you call early for a photography session. The rest of the time it's only Maxine," she said to Max, her accent was rich and aristocratic. "Hello, I'm Sienna, Victoria's mother."

As Max was about to say something to Sienna about her little revelation, Victoria immediately launched herself back into the dialog between her parents and her friend.

"I invited Maxine to spend the night," she informed them, not even offering them the illusion that there was a choice involved.

If she took up that tone with her own parents, Max and her parents would be having a long talk about respect. Sienna and Damien, on the other hand, was unperturbed by the combative nature their daughter had. They just sort of stared in amusement.

"Probably only fair, considering you seemed to have moved in to her home," Damien addressed his child. He directed his attention to Max and added. "Are your parent's sick of her yet?"

As Victoria bristled, Max immediately shook her head as a strange surging desire to protect Victoria washed over her. She knew it was a joke, she could see Damien smirk had no malicious intent, but still she had to do something, say something on behalf of her silent friend.

"No, not at all," Max denied, raising her voice a little. "Victoria is… Victoria is great friend. You're lucky to have her."

Max watched the smirk drained away from Damien's expression. That was not say he wasn't amused, it just seemed as though he was much more thoughtful about it. He seemed to be much more… reflective as he looked from Max to Victoria, who had shifted tin place. She remained unable to focus on any of the people around her but she seemed almost… elated to hear Max's words.
"That we are," Sienna spoke on behalf of her silenced husband. "We have a function tonight for the Grace Hospital, so I'm afraid we can't properly receive you. That is, unless you both are interested in coming along."

"We really aren't," Victoria answered her plainly. It was a little rude, but Max had to agree with the underlining sentiment. She wasn't so sure formal affairs were her thing.

Victoria's father nodded. He looked a little bothered by the dismissal, but he seemed unwilling to address it. The last thing he probably wanted was to fight in front of a virtual stranger.

"Alright then; we should be home by two in the morning," he informed the two girls. "Maxine – or Max, you haven't given us a preference - it is a real pleasure to finally get to meet you. We'll have a proper sit down tomorrow at brunch. As you have opened your home to our Vic, so too is our home open to you as well."

Max could only nod. She had thought from the way Victoria had spoken about Damien Chase, that his words would not match his true feelings for it, but instead what Max saw was a earnestness in his words. He didn't change his tone or look at her like she was underneath them. He just seemed to be… genuine.

As Damien pushed on by his daughter and her friend, Sienna paused to give Victoria a kiss on the cheek before she turned to Max and took one of her hands into both of hers. She held her eyes on her husband until he entered the car before she directed her attention back to the two girls in front of her.

"It's a genuine pleasure to meet someone who makes Victoria smile. That is a rare thing these days... a teenage thing, I suppose," she spoke to Max, her mouth forming into a smile. "Well, until tomorrow then. I shall have to remember to break out Victoria's baby picture."

As Max let out a laugh and a nod at the idea Sienna had suggested, Victoria groaned. Taking an immense pleasure in embarrassing her daughter, Sienna smiled to the two of them and went to join her husband in the back of the Bentley.

"Fucking shoot me..." Victoria muttered out loud as they watched the Chase's pull out of the driveway.

Max remained silent as she watched Victoria slowly turn back to face her. She looked well beyond annoyed by this, and was now staring at the source of her annoyance. The two girls stared at each other as Victoria's annoyance started to melt, but it did nothing to stop her obvious embarrassment at the hands of her parents.

"So..." Max started, struggling to maintain her control over her urge to laugh. "I make you smile?"

Victoria rolled her eyes as she retrieved her phone from her bag.

"Ugh," she spat out. "Just... just shut the fuck up and tell me what you want for dinner."

Max's small smile widened. She stepped forward and cozied up next to Victoria, their shoulders touching together.

"I thought you told me to shut up."

Victoria rolled her eyes and gave Max a small shrug before she wrapped an arm around Max's arm and dragged her into the house.
Max laughed the entire way.

Maxine wanted Italian, so Victoria ordered Thai instead.

It was, perhaps, a bitch move on her part, but Victoria felt it was a suitable punishment for teasing her. Max moaned a lot about it, but as it turned out she hadn't had Thai food before, so it became a fun little experiment for the girls and it wasn't long before Maxine had charmed her once again.

Naturally it was taking some time for Maxine to get used to the home she was now apparently completely open to her after her first encounter with father. She supposed she really hadn't had a reason to be surprised.

The two of them were so far removed from being typical parents that to interact with Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield, was a culture shock in how parents ought to behave. Instead Mother and Father just sort of treated her like an underage adult. Freedom was nice, but freedom wasn't nearly as warm or reassuring as the love and guidance they didn't offer. Freedom didn't pick her up and tell her everything was going to be okay if she failed. It just made her… harder… angrier, and more inclined to hurt others because fuck them. She had survive above all else.

That was a mindset which protected her for such a long time, and now here she was sitting next to a girl she had come to…. God, she didn't know exactly what it was she felt. Was it idolization? Adoration? Obsession? Shit… was it love?

While the each description had scared her, it was that last one scared her the most. All that she about being in love was the extremely vulnerable two people had to show each other. The idea of handing Maxine her heart – and yes, that was cheesy as fuck – was getting harder and harder to resist every day… every hour to be quite honest.

She looked to Maxine. She sat there on the couch; her feet pulled up and curled underneath her. Her shoulder pressed against Victoria's as she watched some movie Victoria was not paying attention to at all. She stared at the soft small hands resting on Maxine's lap. It was agonizingly close to her, just begging to be just held. She wanted to cling onto her hand tightly as the thrill of their fingers intertwined ran through her like a frayed nerve.

While they might have held hands often enough, this time just felt… different for some reason… more intimate. She just had to be smooth… really smooth. Say something witty or cute, something that would turn that sweet smile Maxine wore into something so much brighter.

"You know, you can hold my hand now if you wanted to. I wouldn't mind it," Victoria blurted out.

Quietly, Victoria wondered just what was the quickest and easiest way to kill herself in the next thirty or so seconds.

Maxine turned and directed her eyes to Victoria as the thoroughly embarrassed taller girl attempted to calm herself down. Although she smiled, she turned away and did not take Victoria's hand. Instead she laced her fingers together and directed her compete focus back to the flat screen.

Victoria turned away and ignored the flash of anger and irrational jealousy she felt at the sight of
Max holding her own hand. It was sort of like having a job she wanted stolen away from her. Seizing on her annoyance, Victoria scooted closer to Maxine and took her hand. The act stiffened the Brunette up, causing a small gasp to escape from her.

Maxine bit her luscious bottom lip as she turned to face Victoria again. Her body pushed little closer to Victoria's.

"I like that, you know? You being forward with me… not dominant, but confident," she confessed to Victoria softly. "If there's something you want… well, I want you to take it, or at least try. It's very… attractive-"

That was all the confirmation Victoria had needed. She leaned in and kissed Maxine as hard as she could.

Maxine didn't kiss her back.

Instead, Maxine froze up as Victoria's lips had missed hers completely and instead they touched against her teeth.

Victoria pulled her mouth away and stared at Maxine. Mortified, she looked at the blank expression the girl had kissed wore.

"You kissed my teeth…” Maxine pointed out the obvious. She now looked close to just breaking down and laughing.

Victoria threw her hand up and covered her face. This was such a fucking shitshow now.

"I really, really didn't mean to do that!" She attempted to apologize to the girl she had just humiliated herself in front of.

"You kissed my teeth…” Maxine repeated once again; her tone still dull and taunting to Victoria's ears.

Victoria pulled her hand away as a small bout of fury came back into her.

"I fucking know that, you smug as hell fucking adorable Hipster trash!" Victoria nearly screeched at the still grinning idiot sitting nearly on her lap. "If you'd just shut the fuck up and let me try again, I swear I'd do better!"

The grin on Maxine's face vanished as she noticed the fury and the determination coursing through every fibre of Victoria's being. Victoria watched as Maxine's pupils dilated, her breathing came to a standstill. After only a second's hesitation, Maxine nodded her head.

Victoria leaned in towards the girl nearly on top of her, this time capturing Maxine's lips with hers. It was a soft connection of lips, which parted allowing the tips of their tongues to meet for a briefest of moments. A spark had ignited but in spite of the overwhelming urge to drown in each other, the girls mutually broke apart.

Victoria became aware that Maxine was gripping the front of her light sweater. Her eyes were hooded. She was much more satisfied this time around.

"Wowsers… holy… God… Much better…” Maxine breathed to her, unable to clearly offer anything really coherent.

Victoria didn't let Maxine finish as she pulled her back into their kiss. She didn't need her
validation. She damn well knew it already. Fuelled by approval and success, Victoria ignored the little frightened voice in the back of her head, telling her this was wrong and deepened the kiss, her hand snaking up to push through Maxine's hair and cupping the back of her head.

They paused only once to catch their breath before they met again, and this time the two of them remembered to breathe through their nose, eliminating the need to break apart. Victoria pushed Maxine back gently, laying her down flat on the touch and climbing on top of her. Her hand reached out and grabbed both of Maxine's pinning them high over her head.

Unable or unwilling to escape, Maxine stretch out as Victoria broke the kiss and moaned as Victoria nibbled gently against her skin. It took all of Victoria's strength not to just clamp her jaws around her skin and bite until Maxine finally moaned out. At least that's what she had hoped would happen. Maxine seemed to be locked up in herself. It was sort of like she was almost scared to let herself be free. It was understandable if this was her first time with a girl. Her stolen kisses with Taylor Christiansen were a source of panic and repression for her as well.

Her chest heaving as she dragged her mouth up Maxine's neck and placing them close to Maxine's lips once again, Victoria lingered just out of reach of the girl she laid on top of. She watched, thrilled, as Maxine pushed her head up and kissed her properly. She cut it short and pulled back, her gentle baby blues looking up into Victoria's green.

"Have you…" she started, breathing hard. "Have you ever done this before?"

The answer she had was a confusing mess. She never really placed herself in this situation before. The rumours of course were to the contrary and always were about guys around Blackwell, but beyond a few uninteresting make out sessions with a guy or two, not much ever really happened. This sort of intimacy was not something she was really something she was looking for.

At least not until now…

"A couple times…" she admitted to Maxine. "Never sober though, and never with someone I… kinda like in this way."

Maxine blinked and a small smile formed. She wanted to move her hands, but Victoria grip was a vice. Instead she leaned up, and like at the theatre, she kissed the corner of Victoria's mouth. As the Blonde released her hands, Maxine reached up to cup each side of Victoria's face. She kissed her properly this time, chaste and sweet. It was enough to make Victoria's stomach jump into her chest.

"I kinda like you too, Victoria…" she confessed back, a growing note of shyness forming in her words. "But I mean…. look at us; this is a little fast, don't you think?"

Victoria blinked and turned her focus completely towards Maxine's state, she was red faced with thin layer of sweat had formed over her exposed skin. As much as Victoria wanted to push, to show just what she actually desired from the girl underneath her, her conscience told her not push her luck any further. Good things came to those who waited… At least that was what she heard. Victoria was much more a girl in favour of action; especially now that the ice was broken between the two of them.

As Victoria nodded and tried to detangle herself off of Maxine, the girl underneath her wrapped her arms around her waist and forced their bodies to collide once again. As Victoria looked at her questioningly, Maxine shook her head.

"Please… please don't move," she almost pleaded. "We'll sort everything out later…for now, could you just lay here with me?"
Drowning herself in the tender sincerity of Maxine Caulfield, Victoria nodded and laid down on her side next to her, unable to hide the please look as the girl in her arm's pressed her lips against her forehead. Whatever they were now was could no longer be defined by what the two had once called a friendship. It was new and exciting and possibilities seemed so completely endless.

But the best feeling was already happening right here, right now. Lying in Maxine's arms, feeling her soft breathe touch against the nape of her neck, Victoria felt nothing but the foreign sensation of peace and contentment. Nothing that she held herself to; not the impossible standards she set upon herself, not her parent's successes', not eve her social standing at school. It all had lost its relevance.

For the first time in her short life, she was no longer afraid of herself.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for reading!

Next Chapter: It's July 22nd and something important happened
For the first time ever, James Amber had not put in an appearance for his daughter's birthday.

That was not entirely true. Between his work prior to losing Rose, and the past two years he supposed that while he made a physical appearance, he did not exactly make an emotional appearance for her as well.

James reckoned it just got harder and harder as he watched his daughter grow up into an amalgamation of both her mothers.

Looking at Rachel these days, the line began to blur between the two women. Before Rose died, she was Rose's daughter through and through. He may have been drowning in his work, but James never failed to notice just how popular was. She had the same sort of ambitious drive Rose possessed; it attracted others into her orbit.

These days, his greatest fears had come true in spite of the interventions of a reformed Sera and a genuine love from Chloe Price, Rachel had long since incorporated the furiously blind destructive nature of her birth mother during her most dangerous moments when they were together. Now she was out in the wide world, dragging that poor Chloe along. He could only hope that they were both being safe together.

As he pushed his worries aside, he looked at himself in the mirror once again to make sure he was wearing his dark navy blue blazer and white plain T-shirt looked alright. Under most circumstances, he would not have been so fussy, but he had Sera coming over in a short while and an inexplicable desire to impress had left him confused and very self-conscious.

These were strange days to be James Amber and Sera Gearhardt. The two of them had voluntarily started taking steps back to a road of friendship after so many years hating each other, then two years of respectful interactions. Now here they were spending all of their free time in each other's company. They spent many hours talking about the old days; James relayed countless stories about their daughter to Sera as Sera served as confidant to James's grief. And there was tea; lots and lots of tea.

It was a strange place to be in, where Sera was the guiding hand to him through his situation. She was right that she hadn't experienced something like what James had, but she had an acute awareness of the path he was leading himself down on. He was glad to have had her experience, but it also made him upset to think that Sera had not only gone through this, she had gone through it alone and dragged herself inch by inch from the abyss by herself and one end goal.

It was an end goal which he was prepared to kill her over.

The shame he felt for that was overwhelming at times. Sometimes it was even more debilitating than his failure to protect Rose. As much as it hurt, Rose was gone and there was nothing he could do to change that. But Sera was still alive, his part in her misery was also in the past but she was still alive and he could still see what giving up on her had done to a woman he once loved… still sort of loved, a woman who she had given the world to in the form of his daughter. Even now she
was so brittle, like a hummingbird.

Exhaling as he heard a knock on the door indicating Sera was being her usually punctual self, James grabbed his phone off the counter and left the bathroom, his eyes focused squarely on the chat screen to his daughter, her avatar had been changed from a selfie with Chloe to a raw looking sleeve tattoo that put Sera's to shame.

As James typed a message to his daughter, he hoped to God that it had belonged to Chloe.

**You – Thinking about you on your 18th birthday, Rachel; I hope you and Chloe have had a good and safe day. - Dad**

Putting his phone away as he opened the front door, he found Sera standing there. She was wearing an open long white jacket, a black dress ending at her knees, high heels which added an extra couple of inches and black tights. She looked… a little uncomfortable by the get up.

He could not blame her for feeling that. For the first time since they started hanging out, he had managed to convince her to do something within their age bracket. Namely go to an actual restaurant and not the Two Whales. The Two Whales was fine, of course. It just wasn't quite what he had in mind, and considering Sera dragged him there whenever they had to eat, he thought it was only right that he got a say in for tonight.

As for Sera… well… she looked really good.

"Hello, Sera," James greeted her as he stepped out of the house and locked the door behind the two of them.

The worry seemed to vanish and Sera smiled as she allowed him room to step by her.

"Hello, James," she greeted him back. "Are you ready to…?"

Sera fell silent and narrowed her eyes at the man. The strange annoyance she wore surprised James enough to squint right back at her as he pondered what was it bothering her. His confusion was heightened even more as Sera stepped forward, her hands gripping each side of his shirt.

Time felt like it froze as he drowned in her presence.

"Ah… Sera… what are you doing?" he asked her out loud, doing his utmost to ignore that old feeling.

"You know, I have been **trying very hard** to make you look like less of an old man," Sera complained as she yanked the tucked in shirt from out of his pants. "You're not making it easy for me, are you?"

As she smoothed the edges out, she smiled again and looked up at him; the expression she wore was a flashback to their best days. Where Sera was willing and able to wrap his teenage self around her little finger and he was only too happy to let her. Now here they were in their forties and it was starting all over again.

James had thought he had the ability to turn off his feelings for her, but he hadn't. He could suppress them, he even was convinced he had stopped loving her in their 15 years of silence; but now here they were. Sera was sober and responsible, and James was a lonely widower and standing in front of him was a woman who had retained much of his heart even after fucking everything.
Sera dropped her hands to her side and looked satisfied by her work. As responsible as she had become, she still held onto her youth, but now it was matured, more refined.

"There we go..." she murmured gently as she inspected him. "So much better now..."

James was spared from a response. His phone beeped and James immediately went for it. Sera sort of frowned as James inspected the text, apparently a little annoy he hadn't reacted to her in a way she preferred.

**Dawn - We are. Thank you, Dad. Give Sera my love. She might have played a role in this birthday thing as well. XO**

Thanking Rachel for the distraction, he handed his phone over to Sera for inspection as Sera reverently read the message her daughter had left him, she allowed James to guide her to the car and enough to time to clear his head for tonight.

At this rate he was going to need every lapse such as this to make it through the night.

...  

...  

As the Molly haze overtook her, all Rachel could do was come to hate this community that expected her to be a member of.

By principal, Rachel Amber did not march to anyone else's drums but her own and Chloe; and having spent the past week and a bit soaking in just how insecure the gay community actually was, Rachel was itching to move on as fast as she possibly could.

She had no problem with the community in a traditional sense. No anger or hatred for any of them. If what they did helped them, then who was she to judge; but nothing about them was helping her, and so her interests in the community had worn thin. Especially as they always seemed to have a cause they were trying to get Chloe and her involved in, meanwhile the two of them already had enough shit on their own plate as it was.

That was not to say she hadn't met interesting people. While they might have been paying her, Rachel had come to appreciate the hard fought nature of Karina Andressen. She had left the relatively safe haven of Norway to follow her heart and dream girl, Dahlia Hunter back to the United States in the early 1990's during what she called 'the golden age of American homophobia'. In her mind, the Americans were too polite to treat her like shit, but too scared of her to treat her like one of them. So those years were spent dancing and weaving through the passive aggressive conflicts, the AIDS crisis stigma and the occasional rape attempts meant to cure her gayness.

It clearly wasn't an easy life, but Karina got through it relatively unscarred. She definitely encouraged Rachel's growing desire to protect Chloe and her, though, which as nice to see someone else understand self defense wasn't something to scoff at. When they got home, Rachel decided, she was going to get a gun and a conceal carry permit.

Between losing Mom and wanting to protect her Chloe, she was not going to let either of them end up on the wrong side of a gun ever again. After everything that had happened, it just seemed like the smart move. If it bothered Chloe like it had with the knife she tossed... well... they would just have to talk it out. Like couples did.
This subject was not birthday thoughts, and certainly not while high on MDMA and drunk with an equally intoxicated blood wife waiting for her. With that in mind, Rachel stepped out of the bathroom stall and ignored the two girls making out on the counter in between bumps of what appeared to be cocaine as she washed her hands.

Her body felt like it was on fire, and it wasn't the drugs or the dance music pounding into her skull. It was the many need tattoos and her hand wound which burned. As Karina promised, the two of them were indeed in a world of pain, but damn did they look hella cool. The black ink of the astronomical symbols hid the scars almost perfectly. There was something about the work though… it just made her feel… different.

Adjusting her cleavage to an appropriately lurid level, Rachel glanced at the duo making out and decided she was going to get laid on her birthday as soon as she could, and thankfully she had a blue haired Amazonian fucking goddess waiting for her. She was just one command away from turning Rachel into a heaving, sopping mess.

So with that in mind, Rachel left the bathroom and pushed her way through the crowd, ignoring the glances and the eyes following her. They could look all they wanted, but she belonged to the only person in this club that meant anything to her.

Who, as it turned out, had become an involuntary social butterfly.

Chloe stood there at the bar, her back turned to her a drink in her hand as she bobbed her head to the beat of the IDM. Tonight she opted out of her frayed up denim for a skirt, and Rachel didn't even have to politely suggest it. The Club was a little higher end and had an unenforced dress code, so she appeared to be making an effort for her.

She looked hot... and currently frazzled.

Next to her there was two guys by the look of it, both of them seemed to be trying to catch her attention. Talking to her, they were edged in close. Chloe kept her head low just as one of them put his hand on her shoulder.

That was fucking that. Rachel's brain went on automatic, with visions of Eliot Hampden running through her thoughts. It didn't matter that she saw Chloe shove the guy off her. He had no business touching her in the first place. She picked up her pace, brushing right through a dancing couple and ignoring their calls of 'bitch' at her.

Okay… so perhaps this reaction was probably a reason not to get a gun.

Her approach was immediately noticed by the guys. Like the disgusting pervs they were, the presence of another girl was enough to draw their attention away from the literal perfection they were trying to pick up only moments prior. Rachel reached out and surprised Chloe with a back hug, her arms wrapping tight around her hips. Chloe stiffened out of the shock.

Keeping one arm wrapped around her and ignoring the onlookers, she reached out and gently brushed back Chloe's hair, revealing her ear properly.

She had a new improvisation game to play now.

"Excuse me, miss," she luridly breathed directly into Chloe's ear. "Are these guys bothering you?"

Chloe glanced at the men for a moment before looking away to slam the last of her Vodka shooter.

"Only for the past ten minutes… didn't even bother to give me a name…" she answered Rachel,
her voice biting as she tapped her glass to catch the bartender's attention.

The man who had led the attempt at picking her glanced back at his friend.

"My name is Eddie and this is-"

"I didn't give a fuck from the start," Chloe snapped back.

Inwardly, Rachel grinned and pushed her mouth forward, nibbling on the back of Chloe's ears. Her eyes never left the faces of the two red faced and extremely confused and awestruck men.

"Ten minutes is such a long time," Rachel spoke again, dropping her tone as she pulled away from Chloe's ear. "Hmm, tell me something, angel. Now that you had such a long introduction to these fine gentlemen, would you go home with them? Or would rather try your luck with a voice in your ear for about 20 seconds…"

Chloe slammed her drink again and directed her attention towards the men as if she was seriously considering what Rachel had said. It seemed as though she too liked their little game. Especially as they both watched the guys attempt to present themselves as much cooler than they were.

"Tempting offer, boys," Chloe finally addressed them without insult. "…but I think I prefer the mystery prize."

With that spoken, Rachel released her grasp on Chloe and stepped out in between the men and her girl. Ignoring the urge to say something offer to the two of them, she instead smiled for them. It was probably the only thing keeping her from losing her cool.

"Well, it's been fun, but you heard the vixen," Rachel told the guys, wrapping her arm around her shoulder. "Back off, this sweet thing is mine."

It took a moment or two before both the guys recognized that there was no way in hell Rachel was about to back down before they stepped back and went further down the bar, probably scoping for a new victim. With the threat of them gone, Rachel rounded back to Chloe, took her refilled shooter and slammed it down.

"So," she said, slamming the shot glass back down on the counter as she grinned up to Chloe. "What's a fine piece of ass doing in a place like this?"

She watched amused as Chloe attempted to be casual in her shrug. Oh, that girl could pretend all she liked, but like it or not Chloe had become a damn good drama student over the years.

"Waiting on my girlfriend, I suppose..." Chloe informed her, feigning boredom as looked back down on Rachel. "Blonde, hazel eyes about your height and tattoos... she says and does a whole lot of crazy shit, but I love her. Fucked if I know why-"

Chloe inhaled sharply and went dead silent and still as Rachel had stepped closer, pushing her body right into Chloe so that no gap existed between the two of them. Rachel allowed her hand fall between Chloe's legs, pushing under her dress and cupping her sex. She smiled even wider at the sight of Chloe's eyes dilating. She bit her lip as though struggling to remain in control.

All it took was Rachel pushing her fingers upwards to break the will of her Blue haired temptress. She slide inside her panties and pushed across her almost bare Mons until her fingers were pressed against her lips. Chloe's face lit up at the daring exhibitionism she was partaking in.

The two of them shared a look. Chloe bit her lip and nodded.
Rachel plunged her fingers inside, Chloe and pushed her lips hard against Price's.

Tongues met as Rachel rocked her fingers inside her. There was nothing sweet or romantic about it. Neither of them was looking for that. Not when the two of them were standing there surrounded by dozens of club patrons. This was a drug induced act of indulgence. It was a daring act of spontaneous sexual relief between the two of them. Thinking about, it was her birthday, and it really ought to have been her receiving this, but she was a generous girl.

Besides, Chloe was worth the efforts. Plus listening to the little gasps and filthy as hell utterances of 'holy shit' or 'fuck' made it all worth it. The girl knew how to come and Rachel enjoyed listening to it almost as much as the act.

Pulling her mouth back from Chloe's she ran her tongue up the length of her neck before pulling back. She pushed in as deep as she could and watched in delight as Chloe shuddered and fell down into Rachel's waiting arms. Her chest was heaving as she struggled to fight the urge to come right on the spot.

Rachel smirked and pulled her fingers out of Chloe's body. She leaned to her side and gently kissed the mouth of Chloe's skill tattoo. It was enough of a preview for the time being. They would continue this in privacy. After all she was still a respectable girl.

"Your girlfriend sounds like a loser, Blue..." she breathed to the gasping taller girl. "Well, why don't we go out and dance, or you can take me to somewhere private and properly thank me for saving you."

Chloe was always a smart girl, in spite of her being fucked stupid in front of others. She reached out and snapped up Rachel's hand, grinning as she led her towards the exit so that the two of them could celebrate her birthday alone, as it ought to have been.

…

Walking up the steps with James at her side, Sera could not help but feel a little please by how well the evening had gone.

The waterfront bistro James had booked them was nicer than she had expected, but she supposed she was never a high society type as the self-made man James always sort of vied to be. It was bustling with the more upscale citizenry of Arcadia Bay, and they all seemed to know James. They were probably interrupted a half dozen times by several parties. One of which was none other than Sean Prescott, who introduced a Mark Jefferson to them. He was apparently going to be a new teacher at Blackwell at the start of the new school year.

She thought about texting the girls, but decided against it. The last thing they would want right about now was the reminder of school.

Probably the best part was that James did not seem to shy away from her with all these rich and influential people. He introduced her by her name and informed them that they were old friends. It was obvious he could not exactly tell the full truth, but she was happy enough with the enormous amount of faith he had put in her now.

By the end of dinner, James was actually laughing and having a good time and Sera really did not want to see an end to this. Not when they covered this much ground. So foregoing taking James to
a bar and letting him have a drink or two, Sera suggested they go see a movie on her instead. James was in too good a mood to disagree, so the two of them returned back to the nineties by going to see Oliver Stone's newest film *Savages* which was a classic Stone violent, sexual clusterfuck.

Now here they were, standing on the doorsteps leading to her home and she was staring stupidly up at him, with her thoughts racing in a million directions and yet all of them were leading invariably to one single destination. All of those… stupid little feelings she tried to ignore. Well they built up into sometime potent; and meeting James at his home, looking smart (if old) in his clothing had finally kicked the feeling into action.

Sera stiffened at sensation of James hand gripping her wrist. She looked at it numbly for a moment before she refocused on the man once again.

"I had fun tonight. More fun than I have had in a while…" he admitted to her. "Thank you for that, Sera. Thank you for everything you've been doing for me… don't… think for a moment I don't appreciate it, because I have… even if you're quick to make fun of me."

The two of them shared a comfortable laugh and silence fell between the two of them Sera felt… from the expression of appreciation James confided. It felt nice to be wanted. Something she hadn't really felt often in her life. Soon this evening would be over and Sera had no idea what tomorrow would bring, and how James would be. It could easily be months before they were like this again.

It was a terrible unknown, and Sera hated that.

It was that fear which finally pushed her over the edge? It was time for her to swallow her worry and step up. After all, what was the worst that could happen?

Sera exhaled and stepped towards James. She felt her lips curve upwards.

"Would you like to come inside?" she invited, struggling to keep a straight face at the entendre. "We could have tea… or more… or… you know… both."

While the smile remained locked on James face, James's eyes widened as he attempted to process just what it was Sera was offering beyond tea. Sera did not know just how else to voice what it was, beyond going the obvious route and telling him that she wanted him to bang her into the ground like the old days…

"What are you…" he started to say.

Reaching into years of daring she had been storing up, Sera reached up and pressed her finger against his lips.

"James, you're a man. I'd say good and decent, but I'm not about to forget what you planned for me; but I'm no saint either so we're on a level footing here," Sera spoke again as she leaned in closer to his face. "So… let's just say, you were my man at one point; and I know how lonely you are. I'd like for you to come in if you feel comfortable with that."

Sera withdrew her finger from his lips and leaned back normal so that she didn't come off as more of a crazy person. She stood there, silently watching as the cogs turned in James' head as he struggled to process what he wanted to say (and more importantly do) to her.

"Sera… I'm…" James started, his eyes falling away from hers. "Sera, I'm sorry again for what I wanted to do to you back then…"

Sera smiled thinly and shrugged. It hurt to know that he was prepared to destroy her life, but she
had long since come to terms with it. The past was never really in the past; especially not when it came to James and her.

"I know you are," she reassured her Ex. "You are a lot of things, James, but you'd only do something like that unless you were terrified, and I know that I was a terrifying unknown back then."

Sera tentatively reached outwards to take James' hands into hers.

"I know that you love Rose, and I will not pretend that I knew Rose well; but I knew enough of her to know she would not want you to just… shut down your entire life until the day you join her again," Sera spoke slowly, deliberately so that her words could not be misinterpreted by him. "This month has been great. It feels like… us again and I don't want it to end just like that. I want us to be some form of what we once were…"

"And us… used to sleep together," James finished for her.

Sera nodded and allowed James to pull his hands out of hers. He ran his hand over his hair as he turned away to think over just what it was Sera was offering him. She was not attempting to get back together with him. She knew better then to think that was possible. But… why couldn't the two of them go all the way with their return to the old days? After all, it was just a little sex…

It was perfectly harmless…

"Look, I haven't… in years…" he rambled out a confession of his lack of sex life to her. "…and you… I don't…"

Sera blinked as James went silent once again and looked at her apologetically. She knew exactly what this was about. Honestly she was surprised that the topic hadn't been brought up before, but she supposed neither of them had this conversation before.

"What year is it?" Sera asked him plainly.

James tilted his head, clearly confused by the seemingly random question.

"It's 2012-"

"It's been fourteen years since I've had sex," she interjected over him.

That really taught his attention. Sera took in James dumbfounded expression with mild amusement. She wasn't exaggerating or anything. She had no reasons to lie. That was the dead truth of the matter; and now that she was sober and starting to remember something she had thought she had lost all those years ago. She was finally coming to terms with just long a dry spell she had been in.

"Heroin always dwarfed sex for me, and I never had to…" she trailed off as she struggled to find the right words. She looked up and added. "I never had a need to sell myself like others I knew back then… that was one of the better upsides to your money. I could just… stay high and not deal with the hassle. I never had to worry about infection or disease because I could afford to be hygienic and…"

Sera allowed James' finish the thought off for himself. The two of them talked about her problems too much as it was. Right now it wasn't exactly a turn on.

"Anyways, I don't have that anymore, and no one ever interested me in my sobriety, and no one around these parts is interesting either except for you," she pressed on, tilting her head. "I'm lonely,
and so are you… and it doesn't have to be anything beyond that."

That was when James surprised her. She felt both of her both of James’ hand rest on her hips. She paid full attention to uneasiness on his face. He had his issues, but he did not exactly appear to be totally against the idea. She hid the urge to react. James was fragile about this. She… had to be cool. Let him come around on his own time.

"I mean, we just started to be friends again," he attempted to rationalize. "You want to… what? Be fuck-buddies all of a sudden? This is like a first date sort of thing."

Sera could not hide the grin. She reached up and cupped his face.

"Oh, James... oh for Christ's sake, we had a child together! It's her birthday today!" Sera gently teased him. She raised her eyebrows and added. "You know, 18 years ago you put me through over ten and a half hours of hell? The least you could do is make up for that now…"

Sera shut her mouth and chastised herself as she looked up to James. Thankfully he seemed to see the humour in all of this.

"Sorry, ignore that last part, no pressure. No means no, of course…" she muttered to him. "So… I'll ask you again. Would you like to come inside?"

As Sera looked back up at him and found James was looking thoughtfully to her. She ignored the urge to celebrate as she watched as he nodded. She instead exhaled and nodded back. With him in agreement, she pushed herself up onto the tips of her toes and carefully pressed her lips against his.

It wasn't an explosion like the old days. A heated explosion of raw passion which made them both forget whatever troubled them. They had a long way to go to go back to that. Instead it was more... murky... both parties were concerned about protecting themselves from the other. Still in spite of this, she felt something that she thought she would never have back.

Sera pulled back and smiled properly. She reached out and took James' hands and led him into her home. They didn't have to rush into anything. They had all night to explore this old familiar feeling.

...
Wasn't a big fan of this chapter. I hope you enjoy it but I'd understand if you didn't. Road to hell ad best intentions and all that. I know people want chasefield and Amberprice, but James and Sera have a role to play and I had a pure Sera and James chapter not too long ago. Upside is Rachel is 18 and the lewd between the two of them will be more on display.

Just a forewarning, between April 10th to 20th I'm going to be busy with real life. I'll still write when I can but I may only get one chapter out in that period and perhaps none. I'll be back at it hard after the 20th so no worries.

Next couple of chapters will be probably purely Chasfield.

Thanks for reading!
Alright, took a little longer then I thought it would, but again with my break/slow-down coming up, it should be expected. I should be able to get one more chapter out and then I'll probably be writing at a reduced level for the ten day. I'll have a chapter out by the 21st for sure.

I may use the time to write some Chasemarsh or Pricefield. We'll see.

I also hope you're enjoying where the Chase family is going. We'll probably spend quite some time on them, although not overtly so. Certainly not for as long as it was in this chapter. Family life shapes people and Victoria is no different, and for the sake of her development, her parents need to play a role. Her behaviour doesn't just fall out of the sky. It's something to watch out for.

Thanks as always for reading!

Chapter Thirty Three: Her Center

Sitting at the Breakfast nook overlooking the estate grounds, Victoria moodily picked away at her soft boiled quail egg moodily as thoughts of that stupid brunette hipster flake.

Maxine had blown her off for today which had probably been the sole reason to Victoria's inability to find an appetite right now. She supposed it wasn't quite as bad as she was making it out to be. Maxine had a surprise family visit and Maxine wasn't able to make it to their session at the Space Needle.

The two of them had settle on doing something they mutually were annoyed at, but Maxine suggested: touristy things. It was the sort of an irony thing Hipsters were always into. It was that hipster quirkiness Maxine radiated off naturally, of which Victoria could never begin to replicate. It was cutesy...adorable... random hipster stuff which she certainly had no reason to enjoy....

Well, other than those cute little noises she made when their kisses got too intense for her… which as it turned out was every time they explored each other. Maxine was sweet and sensitive. God, how Victoria was able to not sink to her basic instinct and simply throw her down and force Maxine to make the noises she had to hear coming from Room 228 was beyond her.

As mind-blowing as it may have been, it was making each passing day that much harder for Victoria (and hopefully Maxine as well) Soon they would be separated by oceans and no amount of Skype calls would be able to replicate the feeling of their lips touching. Compounding that was, of course, school... the continuation of her real life, which, thanks to Maxine, she as realizing hit had become more lie than the truth.

As she tried to push the sick feeling festering away in her, she looked up and noticed her Father was sitting across from her, am iPad in his hands and wearing his reading glasses and was reading
something and totally pretending to not be silently watching and judging her every moment. Just like every other day they spent in each other's company.

"Would Her Grace permit me a presence at her table on this fine morning?" Father spoke up, putting on his best fake English accent he ripped off of mother.

Victoria squinted at her father and did not answer his request.

Taking it as permission from her, he set the tablet down on the table and leaned back into his seat.

"You've been avoiding us, Victoria," he observed the obvious. "I suppose that isn't new. You want your independence, and that is fine. It just feels different this time around…"

He trailed off as Victoria once again refused to speak. He didn't seem to mind her treatment. If anything he loved the challenge. He loved to probe her for weaknesses with questions, comments and observations meant to catch her off guard. It toughened her up, made her who she was… before Maxine entered into her life and showed her another way.

"I like your friend, you know? Max Caulfield…" he pressed on as he removed his glasses. "I always wondered why you never brought home any females friends. It's certainly a nice change up from that Nathan Prescott."

Victoria bit her lip at the mention of Nathan and Maxine in the same remark her father had made.

"Nathan and I… had a falling out…" she spoke up finally, deciding to admit without explaining why it was so. "I don't really… know… I have no clue what's going on in his head anymore."

Although Father nodded, he still seemed sort of uninterested, which Victoria supposed was just how he usually was when it came to her personal life.

"You're lucky to have had an insight for as long as you did," he replied after a moment more of silence. "I've met him before; and I know his father. It's a miracle the kid is even able to function normally at all. If he's bothering you, just… be careful around him from now on."

Victoria nodded; it was sort of what she had planned to do anyways. After what had happened, she would lessen Nathan's presence and replace it with school, the Vortex Club, Taylor and now keeping in touch with Maxine whenever she could.

Maxine might have been able to blow off Chloe Price, but she had no clue what she was dealing with when she had Victoria as a friend.

"Max Caulfield though… now she's a step in the right direction for you," Father continued, his voice lightening into a somewhat wistful way. "Her work is fabulous as well. You know you could learn a lot from her. She understands you don't need a ten thousand dollar camera to capture a perfect image-"

"Would you please just shut up about Perfect little Max's work, for fuck's sake!?!" she snapped at him without hesitation.

She fell silent as the awkward tension between the two of them grew exponentially. Father just sat there, staring curiously at his daughter. Victoria rubbed her face and turned away. She felt like shit, talking about Max that way all because of a stupid insecure bout of jealous had hit her over her father trying to compare and contrast two entirely separate photography methods as though one was better than the other.
If Maxine was here, she'd probably roll her eyes, call her stupid and defuse it altogether with charm and grace, but that was Maxine; she was always the peacemaker. Always able to just let things slide even in the face of insult.

God, she was so fucking perfect, and that was the most infuriatingly thing about her. She couldn't compete with that… all she could do was hang on and hope that at the end of the day Maxine would not see how awful she was.

"Why are you doing this, anyway?" Victoria spoke again, looking back to her father once again. "Why are you pretending to be interested in any of my shit?"

All he did was smirk, completely unfazed by the anger she displayed.

"I'm your Dad for starters..." he reminded her.

"Some fucking job you're doing," she bit back, trying not to pout but failing completely as her father's blue eyes never blinked.

It was humiliating how well he controlled everything. Her father had long since earned his confidence… in comparison she just had to fake it.

"I give a shit because long ago I swore that any child of mine wouldn't have what I had for a father," he replied, his tone unaltered in spite of how much agitation Victoria had dumped onto him. "Your Grandpa came back from three years in Korea with nothing to show but his pride. He ended with a wife and four kids, always a pay cheque away from destitution. He was a mean drunk, and he wasn't shy to take out his issues on us. It motivated me to obtain… all of this…" he gestured to their home as a whole. "Off the backs of the painfully naive; I don't regret it, in fact I would do it again for you, but cutting other people's throats to save my own was all I ever knew-"

"Then you met Mom and everything was fucking easy sailings for you," Victoria interjected once again, reciting his old autobiographical examination of his past. "Blah, blah, blah… rose from nothing… woe to me… oldest fucking story you have… is there a point to any of this?"

Father sort of grinned at her annoyance and stood up, quietly approaching her and slumping down in the seat at her side. It really was the oldest story he had. She ended up relaying it to Maxine because she knew next to nothing else about her father to explain. Father didn't know how to get mad in a traditional sense.

"You got my spirit, Victoria and that is my greatest curse on you. The thing about people like us… we're always able to spot a weakness and go for it. Spotting the blood in the water is our lifeblood…" he pressed on as he pushed his chair in. "But against my nature, I still let the Dot Com bubble opportunity pass by, I saw the housing bubble coming a year before it happened and passed it over… Right now I could have had a field day by up all that cheap property. Hell I could still do it. I could double my net worth in four years buying up the homes of the people I came from and tear it all down for new investment, but I don't do it."

Victoria stared at him as he turned away. He seemed almost amused by it all. Although he told of his horror stories before she was born, he never spoke of what he did outside of his work with Mother. Uncharted territory was always an interesting avenue to venture.

"All that capital went unclaimed because I have your mother; because having someone good and forthright in everything she does is the moral center I needed," he explained himself to his now attentive daughter. "The curse of the ambitious is we need good people in our lives to keep us from falling into the deep end. She gave me purpose, and she gave me you… even if you are a little
Victoria eyed her father for a moment before she permitted him a small acknowledging smirk; but the smirk she thought she would be sharing with father had been replaced. He was examining her thoughtfully; sort of like he was putting together something. It wasn't the first time she noticed it.

"If you don't mind me saying, Max seems to be blossoming into your center," father spoke again, his pace slowly as he carefully seemed to venture into the topic. "You're very lucky to find someone like Max at your age… if it's romantic or not, it is your prerogative. I just hope you respect this connection."

It took all her efforts not to blush at the observation her father had made. It seemed as though he was paying more attention to Max and her then she realized. All their looks… the holding hands… the stolen kisses whenever they weren't around…

"So… so, are you saying a Chase needs good people to keep them grounded?" Victoria asked him, struggling to maintain her flat tone as she purposefully failed to address her father's remarks.

"To understand what you are, you have to understand that the Crab Mentality applies to the traditional values of the Chase family," Father spoke again, watching as Victoria looked nonplussed before he added. "Just imagine a pot of crabs, awaiting their deaths. Some of them will be in a position to attempt an escape. As they try to leave, the rest of them will just drag them back down into the pot and to meet their fate… that is what you came from. Pride above all else."

Victoria sat there in silence, still looking at him; but it was in a different sort of light now. For the first time since… ever he looked vulnerable, almost bitter even. He didn't like to discuss them, like they were his weakness. Mostly because they were… it was them that made him into the man he was trying to repress to this day.

"You escaped though…" she said, breaking the silence.

With a melancholic smile etched on his mouth, Father nodded.

"I did," he confirmed to her. "As the rest of the Chase family chose to cling to the hopes they would not be boiled alive, I saw the writing on the wall and I survived their self-deluded destitution. So there I was, left alone to my own devices and with only one goal on my mind: Never being like them… and the only way I saw that was possible was to never be poor again whatever the cost… And that cost was far more than I expected…"

Father shook his head.

"But I found someone who brought back… clarity," he continued. "It took being with her to realize that I didn't have to fight and destroy others to live… and neither do you. I know you probably feel like that's that is necessary… but it isn't. Being like me is the fastest way to learn self-loathing."

He turned away, lost in his thoughts now. It left Victoria with her thoughts full of new concepts. He had always treated his family dismissively. It was sort of like he figured they were rubes who he couldn't have dumped sooner. Now it was clear how much pain he viewed his family with. The abuse part though… that was something she never factored in before… the idea of Damien Chase being abused as a child… it was incomprehensible to her.

"Father, I…" she started before she paused. "Dad… I don't think I want to go to France anymore."

Dad looked up from the table inspected Victoria once again. He already knew what this was about, so Victoria exhaled and got the formality of the truth out of the way.
"Max… Maxine is the first… friend I've ever made on my own. She's the first friend where I went out of the way to make it happen," she admitted to him. "Everyone else just drifted into my life, but Maxine is… different and with her being in Seattle and me going back to Blackwell…"

Victoria's words failed her. She wanted to say something more. He needed to understand just… what it was she saw and why it was she needed all the time she could get to have with Maxine in the face of their inevitable long distance friendship.

Friendship… right.

"You want to spend as much time as you can get," Dad thankfully completed her train of thought without blinking. "So, is she a friend, or is she someone you care for?"

Victoria folded her hands on the table and once again stared at her Dad to see what exactly was going on in his mind. Realizing quickly it was an exercise in futility, she instead sighed, one hand rubbing the back of her neck as she thought about which words she could use. What feelings she could express without giving things away.

As she once again attempted to hide her true self away from others, Victoria paused and remembered Maxine. She was Victoria Chase and she did not have to be anyone else if she didn't want to be; and right now, she wanted to be honest.

"I don't… know how to describe it exactly," she spoke to her silently observing father. "I've… never felt more comfortable with anyone in my life. I can just… be myself around her and feel I'm safe."

As Dad nodded, Victoria bit her lip for a brief moment.

"If I did like her, is it something that would bother you?" she found herself asking.

She watched as most peculiarly, Dad fidgeted. To say he didn't do that often was an understatement...

"Once upon a time, I would have said yes..." he confessed to her.

Victoria bit back the urge to say something awful. It wasn't long ago that she herself was saying awful things to Price and Amber. Her growing self-hatred got directed at two people that didn't deserve that abuse. There was plenty of other shit which she could dump on Price and Amber without resorting to calling them dykes and she would have been well justified.

As she looked on her Dad, she noticed he seemed a little angry.

"I was taught these things, by bitter people," he spoke slowly to her. "Things were… things were different back then. It was more socially acceptable to beat down others. To top it off, we were dirt poor, and I guess we needed easy… targets. You know… I may be poor, but at least I'm not a faggot' sort of thing? It was just… a pathetic way to position yourself as better then someone else. It was wrong, and yet again, your mother came along and taught me to be a better man than I was before."

Victoria emitted a thin smile for him. She knew that she played an important role in shaping Dad to who he was today, but it seemed as though the extent of it went largely unnoticed by her until now.

Dad reached over and patted her leg. The anger in his eyes had vanished, and replacing it was a warm, reassuring smile resting on his mouth. He was back to his traditionally easy-going state.
"Victoria?" he said pointedly. "Whatever you discover about yourself this summer, I need you to know that you'll have me in your corner…okay?"

Dad paused for a moment.

"I can't say I'm not disappointed you don't want to come on the trip, but I understand…" he admitted with a small huff. "But, if you feel you need to stay, you have my support as well… even if it means having to visit your grandparents solo like the glutton for punishment I am-"

Victoria cut him off as she wrapped her arm as tight as she could around her Dad. She slid herself into his lap and rested her head on his shoulder, surprising the man who probably hadn't been hugged by her in half a decade. She forgot all her standard distance as she realized she on the verge of getting what she had come to crave most: an out from this France trip.

God… she was actually happy to lose her visit to France! It was unbelievable that Maxine Caulfield had completely fucked up her priorities and for the first time in her life Victoria did not care in the slightest…

"We'll figure something out… once we ride through your mother's shitstorm… I promise…" she heard her father reassure her, squeezing his daughter back.

Victoria smiled and buried her face into his shoulder. It sounded like a plan to her.

…

A thud on the bed and arms wrapped around her body woke Chloe from her hang over sleep and ready to kill a bitch; even if it was Rachel.

They had spent the past two days in a stupor. They got drunk and got high often this summer, but it was never quite this bad before. Chloe blamed it on the Molly they acquired from Karina and her wife. While enjoyable maybe once or twice, she didn't have much of a taste for it. It may have been different if not for the Victoria Chase scare. Call her paranoid, the idea of getting drugs from skeevy motherfuckers wasn't appealing. The only reason she used on Rachel's birthday was because of the connection to Karina and her experience.

Rachel, as always, got a little frisky whenever she played big spoon. She felt soft lips touching the back of her neck as one hand dipped low her delicate fingers gripping the waist band of Chloe's boxers. Under most circumstances, she would be happy to take Rachel on another Chloe Back Ride, but she was too exhausted and foggy for anything beyond lying in bed. Besides, it felt like she had pierced her tongue after last night.

"Good mornin' Sunshine…" she said, deciding to break out James's nickname. "How long you've been awake?"

The nickname earned swift retribution in the form of a love bite on her neck. She deserved that for using a nickname which she seemed to adamantly reserve for his use only. Chloe could appreciate that. There were things which only a child should have with a parent.

Not that she would know anymore what parents did. Dad was gone and everything with Joyce were either co-opted for Douchebag or dropped altogether, and with her being in the dorm or spending all her time with Rachel at her place, that made keeping up with them that much harder.
As much as it hurt Chloe to even think about it, she was... she was just done with Joyce. She might have loved her, but she couldn't just sit around and pretend to be okay with her. Not when every thought she had about Joyce involved murdering the walking erectile dysfunction case.

Chloe winced. That wasn't a mental image she had wanted branded in her thoughts.

"It's four in the afternoon, Beth..." Rachel taunted right back, earning herself a slap on her backside. "I got you something. It's a little gift to you, my rad, bad, hella mad, hot assed inked guardian angel girl... shit I was trying to rhyme... fuck it, take it."

Rachel's phone dropped down onto the blanket and Rachel nuzzled her face into the small of her back as Chloe picked it up and noticed it was displaying Google Maps. Yawning, Chloe sleepily rolled over and faced Rachel, who had suddenly found herself buried in a face full of Chloe tits.

God, what a terrible fate for her...

"What is this?" Chloe asked her, her hand stroking the top of Rachel's untamed mane gently. Rachel sort of it emitted a tickling sigh, her fingers gripping Chloe tighter.

"That, my Elizabeth... that is an address in Seattle," Rachel answered her, still not looking Chloe in the eye as she bristled at the middle name. "More specifically, that marker is the current residence of Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield; and of course Miss Maxine Caulfield..."

Putting the phone down behind her, Chloe suddenly didn't feel well all of the sudden. Rachel had brought her back to a goal which was two years in the making and now potentially hours away from solving if she wanted to. It was a strange feeling to be within such a close proximity to Max Caulfield, and that Rachel seemed hell bent on bringing the two of them together.

Still, as gut wrenching as it may have been... it was nice that Rachel cared for these things.

"I thought we were going to wait until August?" Chloe asked her guardedly, hoping she came off as casual and more interested in showing Rachel a goo summer instead of her being close to shitting herself out of fear.

Rachel blew raspberries on Chloe's tits, earning a laugh and a slap on her head from Chloe before she pulled back just enough to look up into Chloe's eyes.

"Well... we can..." Rachel said silkily. "It's entirely up to you when you want to go; but I was thinking maybe we could treat this like a bandage. Rip it off as fast as we can and carry on? It's only a three hour ride from here. If it all goes sideways, you and I head south."

Chloe arched her eyebrows.

"Back here?"

Rachel shook her head and smirked softly.

"I was thinking more along the lines of LA..." Rachel returned, watching with delight as Chloe's eyes widened. "We've been good girls for so long, why can't we be a little bad. It's not like we'd be breaking a promise about not leaving the Pacific Northwest. It's on the Pacific, its North of Mexico and on the West coast..."

Chloe allowed her smile to grow. Damn... her girl really knew how to circumvent things. She probably really could have followed in her father's footsteps if not for her whole not wanting to be like him.
"Also, the sooner we go to Seattle, the sooner we can totally exploit Victoria's housing offer," Rachel tacked on as though hanging out with Icky Vicky would be fun. "Ignoring the company we'd have to keep, I think it might be hella cool to see how the rich girl lives, right?"

Chloe rolled her eyes.

"Right, because you're such a pauper," she snapped back, earning a lazy face palming from Rachel. She sighed as Rachel pulled her hand back and added. "… I guess it would be kind of nice to send Vict-bore-ria off to France miserable as fuck though…"

"And In the off chance Max turns out to be a bitch, we could totally drop Victoria on her as punishment!" Rachel quickly tacked on.

The two of them laughed at the thought of poor little Max Caulfield having to deal with the monstrosity of Victoria Chase. No matter how bad things might have been between Chloe and Max, Chloe could never imagine a scenario where she'd wish Victoria on her.

The laughter subsided as Rachel on Chloe with a smile. Chloe could not smile back as her nerves began to get the better of her.

"I... really don't know what to say to her..." she admitted to the girl in her arms.

Rachel's smile never faltered, she reached up and pushed her fingers along Chloe's cheek.

"I can't help you with that part, but you know I got your back, right until the bitter end..." Rachel murmured almost hypnotically. "Just... do what you do best. Speak from your heart, Chloe. Let yourself get angry, or cry or just... love her, like I can see that you do, no matter what you say."

Chloe jerked her head up at the words. Rachel loved to push her buttons, and the Caulfield button was easily her favourite button of all. Rachel had over the years managed to divulge more and more things about Max then she had ever admitted to anyone else before. Right up to the fact there was once a time where... well... she sort of crushed on her really fucking hard once upon a time.

"It's not like that... she muttered to Rachel, which only served to fuel Rachel's amusement.

"My precious Chloe, I'm not scared of Max Caulfield," she reassured Chloe. "If everything works out, it might be nice to have a friend... who'll you eventually seduce for the both of us to enjoy..."

That woke Chloe completely. She screeched out and rolled right over top of Rachel, getting a scream and a furious series of slaps on the chest to get the punk girl off of her.

"Oh come on..." Rachel struggled out. "I'll give you pointers... Like how to twirl and wink at the same time? It worked hella the last time I used it... You know, I thought I smelled sex the last time..."

As Rachel relaxed back into her, Chloe rolled her eyes; the very idea of Max Caulfield gay... now that would be the fucking day.

...
Strangely enough, it wasn't the fact that she had more than once found herself with Victoria's tongue shoved down her throat that made her draw this confusion. It came to her as she was sitting in the living room with her parents, her paternal grandparents Fred and Cecilia who had come up from Portland Oregon.

Her family meant a lot to her, of course. Yet all that she could think about was Victoria and how she had blown off their session today and how guilty she felt about it.

This wasn't exactly how she had envisioned her summer would be. Pining for a girl who would soon be out of the country and probably moving on with her life. It all seemed so futile… falling for her, yet here she was, ready to do so. This feeling was only reinforced by the single text message which she had received about twenty minutes ago.

**Victoria C-** Coming over, shit needs saying, will embarrass myself in front of your family if I must.

So here it was. Victoria had things to say; even with their brief time to together, Max knew Victoria would have something beautiful or touching to say. That or she was going to say something completely awful to end things between them so there was no fuss, no muss between them. With Victoria, she could never be quite sure. So that left her in even more of a nervous tizzy.

So there she sat, phone in her hand as she pretended to pay attention to conversations being held between the old people. Dad seemed to be getting a lecture as far as he was aware. Max on the other hand only really smiled and nodded.

The knock on the door broke through her façade of attentiveness. Before she could get up, she saw her Mom appear around the corner and had answered the door.

"Hello, Vanessa. Is Maxine home?" She heard the loud and extremely confident voice she had come to adore call from the front steps.

Max noticed her Grandparents share a look. Considering that Max had made such a huge deal about her name, it was to be expected thy too would have a reaction.

"Someone gets to call Max by her Christian name?" she heard Grandma Cecilia asked her Dad, which only served to create a blush which coloured her face completely.

Completely motivated now to get out of current company now inevitably on the verge to ask her a lot of awkward questions she did not exactly want to answer, Max launched out of the seat and nearly bolted towards the door.

"She is, but her grandparents are over right now," she heard her mother answer Victoria's request.

Victoria was undeterred.

"I know, Vanessa. I just need to speak to her real fast... please..."

As Max made it to the door, she found Victoria standing there in the doorway with Mom. Mom looked annoyed, Victoria looked annoyed. Both of them were probably only one misspoken thing away from a blow up. That was definitely something she wanted to avoid. Deciding the last thing she wanted right now was her Mom battling an irate Victoria.

So Max ducked between the space between Mom and the door and, giving her an apologetic smile, she closed the door in Mom's face. It was rude, that she had no doubts; but it was for a greater good.
Prepared to deal with the consequences later tonight, Max turned her full attention back to Victoria. She stood there looking very jumpy, almost a little worried. It was a serious change up from her usual confident self. Max stepped forward towards her and watched as Victoria took a step back.

"Victoria… what are you doing?" she asked, a smile crossing onto her face in spite of this benign rejection. "I mean, it's not that I'm not happy to see you it's just…"

"I know, but like I said, there are things that need to be said," Victoria spoke, her voice high and flighty as fidgeted in place. "I'm not going to be particularly smooth about what I say so… whatever. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Max nodded and smiled for her. She reached out scooped up Victoria's hand, but this time Victoria offered no resistance. So in silence, Max led her towards the side of the house between the eastern side of the house and the property wall to next door neighbour. Max stopped before they made it to the gate to the backyard and turned back to face Victoria.

She looked nice; Victoria always looked nice, but this time she really seemed to gone out of the way to impress: a cashmere button up sweater left unbuttoned, a lacy white shirt high riding skirt and expensive jewellery, her make-up perfect. Max looked over Victoria. She was well beyond nervous now as the two of them stood there in relative seclusion.

Victoria exhaled and stepped forward, kissing her lips gently for a moment before she pulled back, her hands gripping to Max’s wrists.

"Look Maxine, I wanted you to know that I like you a lot; and whatever we're doing… I just think it's really special…” Victoria finally broke her strained silence; her voice was high and strained. "I-I don't think I've ever felt like this for anyone before. The thought of… just… leaving… when we have so much time left before the end of summer… it's hard, you know?"

Once again Max nodded. It was nice to know that the two of them appeared to be on the same page. That familiar warm bubbly feeling caught her off guard as she realized Victoria was feeling the same sort of feelings she held for Victoria. It was new, it was exciting, it was sort of dangerous even… and she wanted more.

Max looked at the curves Victoria had, a flash of longing bringing heat back to her face. And Wowser did she want more from her…

"So… with that out of the way, I spoke to my father. I told him I didn't want to go to France anymore, that I wanted to spend my summer in Seattle with you," she announced, some of her authority returning to her voice as well as a smile at long last. "He agreed to it. We're ironing out the details, but the main thing is, we get more time to explore… this… us…"

As Victoria returned back to silence, Max stood there silent as she digested just what it was Victoria had sprung upon her. As concept of Victoria removing the France trip from out of the equation, she only barely noticed that the smile Victoria had been wearing started to fade.

"You're not impressed?" Victoria asked lowly, her voice struggling to remain controlled.

Max shook her head. That wasn't what was happening right now, she was just… caught off guard.

"It's not that, it's just…" Max answered right away before Victoria hardened back up to protect herself. "Victoria, you're turning down a month in France for me. How long did you have this trip planned? But then you cancel it just because we kissed?"
The fury in Victoria's expression grew tenfold. She pushed Max away from her, her arms crossing over her chest. It was painfully obvious that her doubts about herself worth and Victoria's pride was coming to blows.

"This was a sweeping fucking gesture, you goddamn apathetic hipster!" she hollered right back at her. "I just opened my heart to you, Max and I sacrificed something I wanted for more time with you and you're just going to stand there and act like what I did was foolish?! You know what, fuck you, Caulfield."

Max did the only thing she thought would stem off the rage and ranting's of Victoria Chase. She slammed her lips back against Victoria's, and forced her mouth open, kissing her as deep as she could. Before she knew it, Victoria had wrapped her arms around her and slammed her back against the house, her bare leg popped out and pressed hard between Max's legs, sending a jolt through her entire body.

Max pulled her lips back and blew her hair from out of her eyes as she looked up at the statuesque blonde looming above her. She was breathing as hard as Max was. Her anger was subsided and replacing it was nothing but unrepressed lust as her arms remained locked around Max's hips.

"I'm sorry… it's just…" Max spoke finally; her voice shaking as she tried to ignore Victoria's digging fingers. "It's just… Victoria, I don't think anyone has ever done something this… big for me before. The idea that I mean this much to you is a little hard to just simply digest. No questions asked. I'm not unappreciative of it, it's just…"

Victoria leaned in and kissed her again. It was softer, gentler as the anger and passion subsided and some contentment returned back to Victoria. She seemed a little embarrassed at her reaction. Max found the silver lining. It would be something new to tease Victoria.

Besides, angry Victoria was kind of hot…

"Well... well… you do," Victoria confirmed as she released Max and stepped back from the shorter brunette, a little embarrassed now. "In the short time we've gotten to know each other. You've come to mean a lot to me."

As the two girls withdrew from each other, Max held her eyes on Victoria, watching as the girl in front of rubbed her neck as she looked away from the brunette. It was clear that she seemed a little uneasy. She did not seem to be the type who would voluntarily open the way she did. The explosion of rage at even the slightest hint she was being shut down was something the two of them would have to work on together.

Deciding now was not the time for that, Max stepped forward. Her movement was watched by Victoria from out of the corner of her eye.

"It is a pretty romantic gesture, Victoria…" she admitted to the blonde.

Victoria blinked and turned back to face Max properly. Her lips twitched as tried to maintain her dignity.

"Yeah…" she replied finally. "I guess it was…"

Taking baby steps towards Victoria, she pulled Victoria into her arms this time. Victoria froze for only a moment before she relaxed, pressing her lips briefly against Max's forehead. Everything was settled once again between the two girls, and Max could finally stand there in Victoria's arms, elated that her wish had come true. She would probably be getting a whole summer with Victoria
now.

"Would you like to come inside?" Max invited Victoria, her head remaining resting underneath Victoria's chin. "My family could use a bitchy, loud mouthed, over dramatic, princess rich girl stirring up all sorts of trouble!"

Victoria permitted herself a small laugh and Max relished in her ability to elicit that sort of response. Carefully Victoria pushed Max just far enough away from her body so that the two of them could look at one another properly, her fingers reaching up to cup Max's cheek.

"I would like that, but could we hang out here for a bit?" Victoria requested coyly. "I think that a romantic gesture as sweeping as this deserves a little reward… right?"

Max grinned widely and pushed her mouth back against Victoria. She was on the exact same page as her...
"I can't believe we're doing this…"

"You better believe it."

"This was such a shit idea. Why did you make me think this was a good idea?"

"Chloe Elizabeth Price, why are you being such a chicken shit?"

Chloe scowled at Rachel from the passenger seat as she noticed Rachel could barely contain the grin on her face. She could think of nothing worse than whenever Rachel would channel Joyce if she was being particularly annoying or stubborn, and today Chloe was being hella annoying and stubborn.

Considering that the two of them were parked outside of the Caulfield residence, Chloe hoped that Rachel would give her a break.

She wasn't entirely certain how they got to this point. Yesterday the two of them had been talking about it, and at some point Chloe agreed and it was all a blur as Rachel went about overseeing the final steps of their departure to Seattle. Rachel drove as well, cutting a three and a bit hour trip down by an hour. The only time she did slow down as they hit the Kirkland suburbs.

It was a mostly silent trip. It seemed as though both of them were far too affected by the anticipation of meeting Max Caulfield. In fact, Rachel seemed almost anxious about it. She might have been pushing for the meeting, but that did not stop her from being worked up at prospect of meeting the girl who Chloe had, for two year, been held up upon a pedestal.

As hard as it may have been to believe, but it seemed as though Rachel was actually nervous by this meeting as well. If Chloe's heart was plunged into the pit of her stomach, she might have teased her about it. So instead of taunting each other, they were right there together terrified of a girl Chloe hadn't seen in four years, and Rachel never.

"Oh, I don't know," Chloe answered her as she pulled off her seatbelt. "Could it be because I've been blowing this moment off for two years and suddenly here I fucking am? God, this is hella fucking weird…"

Rachel did not answer. She just allowed Chloe a small smile and left the truck, leaving Chloe a fluttery mess. Instead of opening her own door, she followed after Rachel and immediately latched herself onto Rachel's back, earning a small scream as Rachel and Chloe tumbled to the pavement painfully thanks to their new raw artwork pressing against a rough surface.

Neither of them paid attention to the good sort of hurt, not as Rachel who was giggling pushed her lips up to meet Chloe's. Chloe joined in as she pulled her mouth back and rolled off Rachel and together the two of them pulled themselves off the pavement, Chloe's arm around Rachel's shoulder and Rachel's arm around her waist.

"What do we say about you though?" Chloe asked as Rachel took the lead and walked them around
the truck towards the house proper. "It's one thing for me to show up on their doorsteps, it's another for some random model type to drop by."

Chloe felt Rachel shrug against her as she clearly started pondering something.

"How about: 'Hi my name is Rachel, I'm banging the little girl who used to terrorize your family. I have tamed her now, no thanks are necessary. It's nice to meet you though!'" Rachel suggested to her, struggling not to grin as Chloe felt the heat flare up.

Rachel's statement brought her back to another uncomfortable truth. Eventually the question would be raised, and she would have to say something. She never thought she would have to go out of her way to come out again after Joyce's wedding. While it was fun to lord it over the evening then, now she was going to have to say something to Max. It was yet another thing piled onto the list of things that had to be said.

"You know, sometimes I just fucking hate that I love you..." Chloe muttered to the girl still in her arms as they walked up the driveway towards the front door.

The reaction earned a small laugh and a swift kiss on the cheek which made Chloe stiffen up as the proximity to the Caulfield house drew closer and closer. That feeling of dread made her legs heavier and heavier, but still Rachel walked, still she led Chloe to the home.

Rachel looked on Chloe, immediately noticing her growing apprehension had peaked in her. She reached out and took her hand, squeezing it just enough to get Chloe to break her focus on the door so that she could look down on Rachel once again.

"I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart," she reassured Chloe, her expression warm and kindly. "I'm going to be right here with you, okay?"

Chloe nodded and smiled as Rachel pecked the corner of her chin and stepped out of the way, placing herself one step behind her allowing Chloe to stand there in front of the door. Her hand remained locked onto Chloe's as Chloe reached out with her free hand and knocked hard on the door.

She stepped back from the door and waited in silence with Rachel at her side. She did not have to wait for long. The door cracked open and standing there was a woman whom she hadn't seen in such a long time. It was Vanessa Caulfield, and unlike Joyce, she seemed to have been virtually untouched by time. The hint of her age was the few creases around her eyes.

"Hello, can I help you?" Max's Mother asked her kindly.

A smile crossed over Vanessa's face for the two of them, but it was not an expression of recognition. It was more polite acknowledgement. Chloe glanced to Rachel, who was smiling dazzlingly for the virtual stranger.

"Hey there, Vanessa..." Chloe replied as arm as she could. "It's been such a long time."

Vanessa blinked. It was clear that she hadn't exactly a clue just who it was standing right there in front of her.

"It's me... Vanessa... Chloe Price?" Chloe elaborated, rubbing the back of her neck. "...Holy shit, have I changed that much?"

That introduction did it. Vanessa's eyes widened as it all seemed to register everything at long last. Before Chloe had a chance to react, she suddenly found herself scooped up and held tightly in the
arms of Vanessa Caulfield. She locked herself up and looked back at Rachel, who nodded and smiled. It was a silent encouragement to Chloe to just let go of her barriers and accept the love shown to her so suddenly.

So that was what Chloe did and Vanessa was intoxicating in a way she hadn't expected. There was such familiar warmth which Chloe hadn't known she was missing until this very moment as she was embraced by it once again. The death of Dad had made her numb to just how many small things she had once loved was torn away from her.

As Joyce had been a second Mom to Max, so too was Vanessa a second Mom to her. She was a little more refined a woman than the more simple tastes of the Price family stemming from her education rather than social class.

"Chloe, oh my god, you've grown so much!" Vanessa exclaimed as she held out Chloe at arm's length to examine her properly. "You look so… so different, so punk… so womanly!"

Chloe tried to blush as she lucked back and noticed the satisfied smirk resting lazily on Rachel's mouth.

"Yeah… five years will do that…" she tried to dismiss as Vanessa released her grasp on the punk girl.

"Please... come in!" Vanessa said as she stepped out of the way and ushered the pair of them into her home. "No one is here just yet, but please make yourself at home!"

Smiling at Vanessa, her spirits elated that some sense of normalcy had been retrained between them even after this long a separation; Chloe nodded happily and stepped into the home, Rachel followed after her at a slowly, more guarded pace.

She didn't have the same sort of connection and she was in a new environment. Rachel didn't like to enter scenarios with little to no information. Chloe might have been talking about Max a lot, but next to no time was spent on Max's parents. Rachel would have to process them on her own time. She probably wouldn't be rude… just protective of both of herself and of Chloe. She didn't want them to be hurt.

Chloe was starting to realize that the wounds Rachel had endured… the mistrust she had carved into her heart… it wasn't going anywhere. It was something Chloe was just going to have to work with.

"Thanks… this is my friend Rachel," Chloe introduced Rachel to the older woman, who glanced back to the blonde. "She… sort of kicked my ass for a couple years to make this trip."

As Rachel closed the door behind herself, she turned back to Vanessa and Chloe and together the two girls followed after Vanessa.

"It was hard work, but someone had to end this stupid silence," Rachel said idly as they followed Max's Mom.

Her words earned a small laugh from Vanessa. Already it seemed as though Rachel's charm had begun to work its magic over the woman. Chloe gave Rachel a small nudge and pretended not to notice the faux cross look she got in return.

"Well, I'm glad that you have," Vanessa replied, sounding relieved. "Chloe and Max were attached to the hip once."
"That's funny; Joyce says Chloe and I are attached at the head..." Rachel blurted out back to her immediately.

Chloe rolled her eyes, she hoped it wasn't innuendo. If it was, Vanessa's renewed laughter didn't indicate anything was wrong. The three of them entered a hella nice living room. It seemed like the move Ryan and Vanessa had made was financially a right move, even if Chloe was still bitter over it.

"Yes, I remember that when Chloe is friends with someone, you're stuck with her," Vanessa said as she turned around to face both the girls who had been trailing her. "It's what I'm hoping will be the case for Max again."

Chloe slipped her hands into her pockets as she looked around. Her attention was directed immediately to a photo of Max on side table. It was taken some time around when she first moved to Seattle. She wasn't smiling.

"Do you think she deserves that?" Chloe asked Vanessa finally, her voice low.

She turned around and found that Rachel and Vanessa had been watching. The smile Rachel had was now gone and she had grown more weary. Vanessa looked a little put off as well. It was a something resembling guilt. At least that was what Chloe privately wished. Ryan and Vanessa had destroyed a friendship when she needed it the most.

Perhaps that was a bit of a stretch. She could understand why now, but at 14 she could not comprehend why, and the loss of Dad meant she was looking for people to blame. At first it was Ryan and Vanessa, then it was Mom for being too lost in her grief to help her with Max, then it was Max for ghosting her, and now... now she was acknowledging that she played a role in this as well. She could have reached out with greater and greater effort.

Looking at the picture she saw of Max, Max was not in any better of a place than Chloe had been. It seemed with the fog of distance finally lifted, it was as though everyone played a role in fucking up this friendship, no exceptions...

"Max..." Vanessa started again, her voice a little strained as she struggled to find the right ones. "She made an error in judgement. I'm not going to pretend what to know what is going on in her mind, what with her recent... addition in her circle of friends. I think it's just a teenager thing, but I know that she has never stopped thinking about you. Her room is a testament to that."

Chloe exhaled and nodded. She would like to take a look for her. Chloe joined Rachel once again as Vanessa pulled out her phone and scrolled through her texts. She took Rachel's hand, who squeezed it immediately.

"Max is coming home in about half an hour," Vanessa said as she put her phone away and turned back to Chloe and Rachel. "I... I'm going to run out and get something for dinner for all of us. You two make yourselves at home. I think you and Max should have some time to each other. Have her text me when the dust is settled and try not to... well... break things and hurt each other, please?"

Chloe could not help but laugh and as she nodded, Vanessa immediately launched herself back at Chloe and swallowed her into a hug once again. It was brief, but overwhelming. Vanessa let go and with a smile, she left, leaving behind Chloe and Rachel standing together in the living room.

As the door shut behind Vanessa, Rachel pulled Chloe right back next to her.

"She seems nice," Rachel observed as she turned around to face her properly. "Would you like to
go snoop in Max's bedroom?"

Chloe smiled at Rachel's inclination to be devious and silently sat down on the couch, sitting Rachel on her lap and holding her in place around her waist. As tempting as it was to listening to the little devil sitting on her, for now Chloe was not going to snoop.

That was always Max's sort of thing, anyways…

…

Pulling into the familiar neighbour Maxine lived on, Victoria brought her car to a stop only briefly to allow a couple of kids to bolt across the road. She glanced to Maxine and took in the sight of her, smiling as she bit her lip. She seemed to be tapping out a text to someone.

It had been another successful session. The two of them had driven to the coast for the afternoon. Maxine had asked her for a few pointers on her technique, which was both a surprise and sort of a validation that perhaps she had some modicum of talent enough to catch Maxine's auteur attention.

She was being hard on herself again. If Maxine heard her thoughts, she'd probably berate her. But still, with her parent's drooling all over her naturalism, it was only a little intimidating to be approached by Maxine. Maxine for her part seemed unbothered by it. It came from that sophisticated maturity she possessed where she did not easily fall for things.

"Mom's getting take-out, dude, sweet!" Max said to herself. "Coolio, I'll see if can get Thai."

Victoria blinked, annnd there went the sophistication. God, sometimes she could be such a dork in a wonderfully adorable way.

"Did you just call me Dude?" Victoria repeated as she revved the engine back to life.

From out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Maxine's smile widened as she looked in Victoria's direction. Without warning, Max leaned over the rest and pushed her lips against her cheek. Victoria allowed the rush of warmth to flow through her. It was not much different than the drugs she experimented with, except now it came from a source which she trusted.

"Dudette… there, is that better?" Maxine teased as she sat back down properly.

Victoria, as amused as she might have been, went through the motions. She rolled her eyes.

"Ugh, not only are you a hipster you're a neo-80's synthwave Hipster," Victoria bemoaned playing along with Maxine. "God, it's no fucking wonder why my Dad likes you so much."

Maxine giggled lightly.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask if I could get his old Motorola MicroTAC…" she started, but she quickly trailed off. She frowned and pointed in front of her and added. "Huh… visitors…"

Victoria directed her eyes to where her where it was Maxine was pointing. Her blood immediately ran cold. There, sitting on the curb was a truck. It was a beaten up old Ford F series that looked like it spent most of its life in a junkyard, because it fucking did. It was the ratty old truck which was used to shuttle around Chloe Price and Rachel Amber.
They were here, in Seattle, inside Maxine's home.

The deception was over, the lie she tried to convince herself was real was finished. Now here she sat with a girl she cared for, and was about to lose for her arrogance.

"Victoria?" she heard Maxine breathe next to her. "Victoria... are you okay?"

Victoria could not answer her, she felt… off… wrong. The weight of her inability to tell Maxine the truth as she deserved to know was crushing, yet here she was. The truth would be out, and Maxine would come to hate her. She would be all alone again and she could not blame anyone but herself for it. Worse still, her humiliation would be witnessed by Rachel and Chloe. Girls she had went out of her way to humiliate once upon a time because it was easier to attack then to deal with what was inside her.

"Maxine..." she started before she stopped herself as she pulled the car in behind the truck. "Max, I'm sorry..."

She felt... unworthy to use such a beautiful name for the girl next to her now.

She watched as the smile slowly died from Max's face; she sat there, curiously confused by Victoria's behaviour. She would understand soon enough. She would learn the truth and everything would go back to how it was supposed to be. Max reunited with Chloe, she would have a new friend in Rachel and she would be all by herself once more.

Fighting the urge to tear up, Victoria unbuckled her seatbelt numbly walked around to Max's side. She dared not look at the direction of the house where a lone figure waited for them.

There, sitting on the front steps was a stranger to Max; her presence had left the brunette a little stunned. A tall blonde girl wearing a low cut white v-neck shirt. Written on the front in splotches of red ink were the words: A World Committing Suicide. Her legs were pulled up in front of her, revealing the edges of a new tattoo on her calf.

Between her lips was a cigarette, which she clutched between her fingers, revealing both a vicious healing cut and a star and astronomical tattoo; the smoke of her cigarette hazing over her vicious looking hazel eyes. Those haunting eyes stared at the two of them, like she was torn between delight and shock.

Finding her courage, Victoria closed the door behind Max and finally, she stared right back at Rachel Amber sitting on the Caulfield steps.

Rachel stood up as the two of them approached. Max smiled at Rachel, but she seemed far too curious for it to be completely honest. She was jumpy around new people and Rachel... Rachel was a terrifying force of nature, and Victoria had known her throughout her entire time at Blackwell.

Max, of course, was the definition of smooth.

"Hello," Max addressed her plainly. "Who are you?"

As smoke billowed from Rachel, she tilted her head curiously at Max, as though she was a new plaything. It was the sort of look she saw her give Chloe, and Victoria wanted nothing more than to rip her fucking eyes out.

"Who I am will only complicate things right now..." Rachel spoke slowly to the girls in front of her. "Why don't you go on inside; I think your friend should stay outside with me. Everything is
about to change for you, Max Caulfield. You can thank me later…”

Max looked from Rachel to Victoria. She did not seem to want to leave Victoria alone in the presence of the devil in a blonde vixen form. She reached out, taking Victoria's hand for a moment, only serving to drive home her guilt. Victoria wanted to kiss, had to kiss.

So that was exactly what she did. She leaned down and surprised Max with a hard, deep kiss. It may have been the last one they shared. How could she kiss Victoria again when everything came to light. Max did not protest, she did not care that a stranger was right there watching. She kissed back, slower than Victoria.

As the kiss broke apart, Victoria turned and saw Rachel standing there. She was still and poker faced as she pretended like none of what she saw was of any interest. It clearly was, though. Her affirmations about Victoria were true. She was vindicated and all the awful things Victoria had said to her could be thrown back into her face. No she was as much a hypocrite as she was a liar.

Punch drunk from the kiss, Max grinned at her and kissed her again. She stepped back and brushed by Rachel, who stepped out of her path. The door closed behind Max, leaving Victoria standing there alone with an unblinking Rachel Amber.

The first to move was Rachel. She stepped forward, an arm wrapping around Victoria's shoulder and silently she led Victoria away from the house as though to add extra space for the reunion between Max and Chloe. She was still amused looking, but it did not meet her eyes. They were cold and angry. Like Victoria was an outsider to all of this. An interloper who had fucked up whatever plan they had with Max.

"You would not begin to believe the amount of effort I put into getting Chloe to a place where they can have this meeting. If I had known you had known Max these past two years, I would have asked for help," Rachel spoke finally, her tone was light but an underlying rot to her words had left Victoria in a state of terror.

"I only met her this summer…” Victoria attempted to deflect, as though that made up for the weeks of deception.

Rachel saw right through it though as she let go of Victoria and took a seat on the hood of the Mercedes.

"And how long were you aware Max and Chloe were estranged best friends during that time?” she demanded, her voice growing much more incredulous at Victoria's attempt to somehow shift the fault off her.

Victoria remained silent, but she did shrug. It was all Rachel needed to know in order to paint the picture for her. She shook her head, her teeth revealing as she grinned out of disbelief.

"Holy shit, Victoria…” she breathed, like Victoria was a foolish child. "How did it not occur to you that keeping her in the dark was probably not the right thing to do?"

Perhaps it was the way Rachel had spoken, perhaps it was the accumulation of several weeks' worth of guilt, but whatever it was, Victoria control finally snapped. She choked as she suddenly and violently exploded into tears. As she covered her face, she noticed Rachel staring as though she could not believe her eyes that she was witnessing this.

"I know, Rachel!” Victoria sobbed out. "I- I fucked up completely. I'm so sorry! I keep hurting people and I hate it, so much… Maxine was showing me a better way and I fucked it all away
again, right from the start... It was all just a lie. That's all that I am, aren't I?"

As Victoria sobbed alone, she found herself no longer by herself. Arms had wrapped around her and the faint scent of cigarettes that were not her brand and perfume wafted through her as a body pushed against hers. Victoria looked up through her blurred eyes and found Rachel was clutching onto her tenderly.

She had expected hatred, or at the very least taunting; but it did not come. Instead she received a strange display of love she hadn't neither anticipated nor deserved from a girl she tormented for such a long time. But there Rachel stood, holding her in her arms. It was almost sort of like she actually cared.

Victoria unfroze herself just long enough to place her own arms around her... friend. It felt... so nice to have this moment with Rachel. She did not know how long it would last, but she would savour it.

"Why didn't you give it away to Max?" Victoria spoke into Rachel's shoulder, sniffling as she noticed a strange black markings running from the base of her neck down her back. "You could have fucked me over on the spot. God knows I deserve it."

Above her, Victoria heard a small chuckle come from Rachel as her hand ran through Victoria's hair. It was strange... like something her Mother would have done.

"The great Victoria Chase has been humbled, this is a surprise..." Rachel spoke as she pulled back enough so that the two teenagers could look at each other properly. Rachel shook her head as she added. "I'm not going to fuck you over, Vicky. No, I think you need to explain yourself to Caulfield and Chloe. If I jump in... well it'll be kicking a bitch while she's down."

Victoria sniffled and nodded heavily at Rachel as Rachel let her go. It was nice to think that. She looked at Victoria throw her tired, smudged eyes and looked at a girl seemed to be carefully considering something.

"Is that offer still open, the place to stay?" Rachel suddenly asked as Victoria dried her eyes. "Or are you on the way out of country?"

Victoria blinked at the question as it took a moment for it to really sink in. The offer to stay with her was her roundabout way to motivate a reunion in a situation which she would be able to control. The plan fell apart, but the offer remained. Victoria did still sort of owe the two of them...

As for France... well, she would not do that if possible. She was going to spend the rest of the summer trying to unfuck her relationship with Max. Even if it resulted in failure she would not consider it a waste of time.

"As far as I'm aware, I'm not going to France anymore..." Victoria mumbled to Rachel. "You're welcome in my home, so long as you keep Chloe on a short fucking leash."

Rachel smiled and touched Victoria's cheek.

"Ohhh sweetie... I think you're going to want to be extra kind to Chloe for the rest of the summer if you want to get in good with Maxine again..." Rachel gently teased her. There was no malice, just a genuine urge to make Victoria laugh.

It did not work, but she appreciated the effort. Her thoughts invariably drifted to Max and Chloe... the stories she heard... God, they seemed so close; and standing here was someone else who was probably much more versed in the lost relationship than she was.
Victoria wondered how Rachel could be so cool in the face of this. Already she was… worried.

"If I… If I live through this crucifixion; we're both going to get relegated to outsiders if they settled their difference, you know that right?" Victoria asked Rachel, her voice growing low and bitter. "God, the sort of history they must have together… how do we even begin to compete against it?"

Rachel narrowed her eyes at her as her expression twisted up into one of annoyance.

"We don't… oh my fuck, Victoria. When will you ever understand that we don't have to compete over everything," Rachel replied simply and so confidently. "If you care at all for Max, you'll let them have their history. It's theirs and only theirs. It's not ours to toy with."

Rachel paused and looked at the slightly anguished Chase with a little more sympathy. She took a step forward, her hand resting on Victoria's shoulder.

"How long have you been dating her?" she asked. "… And don't give me that look either… You can't closet yourself any longer with me."

Victoria looked at her heels for a moment as she allowed Rachel's determination soak into her. She couldn't keep pretending in the way she had been. It was time to just accept what she was. She had known Maxine Caulfield for the better part of a month and she was heads over heels for her. Now it was in danger of crashing and Victoria was ready to fight for it. She wanted the two of them to flourish.

She wanted what Rachel had.

"We're not seeing each other," Victoria spoke up, blandly. "We're just friends."

Rachel snorted and grinned once again like Victoria was a particularly foolish child. Perhaps that was true.

"Riiiight, like how Chloe and I were just friends when we first started hanging out," Rachel sarcastically answered her. "You do realize that Chloe is going to have a fit about you swapping saliva with her childhood best friend, right?"

Victoria nodded. She would deal with Chloe later, right now she needed to save her relationship with Maxine… and apologize for her behaviour. Her shit behaviour meant to make her feel normal as she spent such a long time fighting an impossible fight against herself.

"Rachel… I'm…" Victoria started weakly. "I'm so sorry for how rude I was to you. The whole dyke thing-"

Rachel snapped up her hand to silence her. She obviously hadn't like it, but Rachel seemed uninterested in that matter right now.

"I won't make you answer for it yet, you got enough on your plate. For now we'll forget about it," Rachel answered her, struggling to keep her anger out of her voice. "Because you're kind of stupid as hell, I'm help you keep your girlfriend, Victoria; and if you survive Max and Chloe's onslaught, you're going to help me smooth out the transition of them back into each other's lives… and you're not going to rock the fucking boat for either of us."

Victoria blinked as Rachel held her hand out.

"So… do we have an accord?" she asked, her hand still hanging out in front of her.
Victoria knew better then to hold onto her pride. She nodded and took Rachel's hand. For the first time in her life, she was happy to have a conniving bitch like Rachel Amber standing there in front of her ready to play her games.

Max Caulfield was blankly staring at a ghost standing in front of her.

Gone was her beansprout appearance of a 14 year old and standing there was a woman; tall, curved and proud. Her hair was a vibrant shade of blue. It was the sort of colour which she always wanted to do when she was a kid, but they were both too chicken to actually get. She had a tattoo sleeve running up her right arm. It was an intricate design of butterflies, flowers and vicious looking skull.

More importantly than any of the ascetic details was just how tired and sad she looked. She looked worn down and older than she should have been at 18 years old. Yet still in spite of this exhausting, her blue eyes had lit up as she stared at Max like she was well was looking at a ghost.

The strange girl had been right. Everything had changed, and it was hard to believe that Chloe Elizabeth Price was standing in her living room.

Max watched silently and guiltily as Chloe took a breath, her hands fidgeting at her sides. Chloe exhaled and ran her hand over her eyes to dry her tearing eyes. Max wasn't much better. She tried to smile, but it only helped the tears to flow freely as she looked on her oldest, greatest friend.

"Hey, Max Power…" Chloe spoke thickly to her, her mouth forming a watery smile. "It's… it's been awhile…"

Max nodded her head stupidly. It was all that she could do as she looked on her long lost friend; lost to her foolish isolation.

"Chloe… oh…Chloe…" Max struggled to say. "I… I-

Chloe launched herself forward and scooped Max up into her arms. It was tight, it was painful, and Max wouldn't have traded this moment for anything in the world. Max relaxed and wrapped her arms around Chloe as well as Chloe buried her head into Max's shoulder and together the two of them cried as the insanity that was their separation had finally come to an end.

"I thought I had so much to say… so many angry fucking things…" Chloe admitted to her, muffled by Max's shirt. "But… but can it just wait? I've missed you like crazy, and I just want this right now… with my best friend…"

Max could only nod into Chloe and allowed herself to just cry. She couldn't have agreed more.

Chapter End Notes

End of Act 2.
Sorry it took so long to get out (I mean a day extra) with my absence coming up, I decided to push up the reunion and that took a little time. Don't worry Act 3 picks up minutes after this, not a big time jump!

As always, thank you for reading and your words. I will be back writing on the 20th and have something out no later than the 23rd. Until then, see you around!
Sitting on the couch in such a close proximity as Max Caulfield, Chloe hadn't felt quite this complete in her life and that concept alone had scared her far more than she thought it would.

It scared her because for the first time ever, she had ever given credence to Rachel's observation that losing Max had been like losing a good part of herself. Without Max all these years had made her numb to the fact that she was missing someone so incredibly vital to her. She had spent such a long time pretending to be fine, and now here she sat realizing that nothing was fine during that time period. She may have had Rachel, but Rachel wasn't a replacement or a seal to block out the Max sized hole she left in the wake of her father's death.

Perhaps this was why her anger for Max's role seems almost as though it was an afterthought. Why she was just so happy to see her instead of focusing too much on the anger part.

While it was reduced from the shadow that loomed over this meeting, it had instead become that little reminder that while everything was cozy, there were questions she needed answering. Questions she wondered if Max would be able to fill in.

Rachel had suggested patience on her part, to give Max some time. It ran contrary to what they both wanted to do, but Rachel volunteered herself to snoop in Max's bedroom and found a treasure trove of picture of them in their youth. Whatever that had gone on in Max's head to make her have such a lapse in judgement… It was far more complicated than they had given her credit for.

Whatever the case was it could wait. Something else was on her mind beyond just the questions. Chloe could not help but feel that there was something peculiar about Max.

It was strange… there was sort of familiar, uneasy feeling she got from Max at first. It was in the way she dressed. Max never was a fashion fiend, preferring comfort and ease over taste and Chloe was the exact same way. So to see her standing in front of her wearing a skirt and a long flowing white summer blouse, alarm bells had gone off in Chloe that something was not entirely right about this. Max seemed way more mature than a 16 year old ought to be.

Still it wasn't all completely different. Underneath the wealthy veneer, Max was still the same old funny deadpan humour, she was still a little awkward and as it turned out, she was definitely a hipsterish girl. Chloe hadn't been able to define Max as a hipster in her younger days, but now that she knew its meaning, Max totally fit the mould.

She looked at Max again as they sat in their oddly comfortable silence, which they both relished in. There was so much to say, but no will to say. Not yet, not in this moment.

But something did have to be said.

"I never thought I'd be in this position with you again," Chloe blurted out to Max, ignoring the small feeling of embarrassment as Max looked at her curiously. "I mean… sitting in Seattle with you. Shows what I know. It'll be the last time I'll doubt Rachel's ability to get shit done..."

Max shifted herself on the couch to properly focus on Chloe, her hands folded up into her lap.

"The girl outside?" Max asked her, curiously. "Blonde, tatted almost as coolly as you… she seems
kind of… freaking intense."

Chloe nodded and struggled to ignore the blatant praise Max had offered for her recent body artwork.

"Yeah, that's Rachel… she's been my angel these years… well… the past two years," Chloe answered her, ignoring to the best of her ability the bad surging feeling brewing inside her so suddenly. "She's the only reason we're here right now. I was so… I was scared to be here, but she kept pushing, she kept… trying to get me to be open and honest about you. We probably would have been here years ago, but… fucking bullshit life got in the fucking way…"

Max nodded and looked at her lap. She seemed to be unable to look at Chloe in the eye once again. It was as though the hard reality that was the years of silence between the two of them had started to peak through their excitement of being together. It left Max acting strange and Chloe with a surge of anger over the matter that she thought she had a better handle over it.

"How's Joyce doing?" Max suddenly blurted out to her. "You know, I missed her terribly."

"If you missed her, you could have fucking called her," Chloe snapped right back at her, revealing her hair trigger.

A tense new silence fell between the old friends. Max turned away, red faced and humiliated. She looked like she was struggling not to react with tears. Four years of separation and Chloe Price still knew how to destroy Max Caulfield's confidence. That ability was something Chloe hated to have, let alone use. It was not much different how she had handed the keys to her heart to Rachel. Placing that sort of trust into others, only to have to use it when they were angry…

No, Chloe would not fall into this trap.

"Sorry…I-well… look, Joyce is hard to talk about…" Chloe admitted to Max, shrugging her shoulders and hoping she at least appeared casual. "She's… I don't know. I don't talk to her much. She grieved for Dad, and then moved the fuck on. She got remarried to some fucking spastic cunt with a moustache. I live with Rachel on the Blackwell campus, and if I'm not there I'm at her place with her parents as much as possible. He's a total fucking piece of shit, and I don't… trust him."

Chloe watched Max attempt to process the information overload she had laid down. It was not only a lot, but it was possibly hard to believe that Joyce and her had gotten to a point where there was literally next to no connection left between the two of them thanks to Joyce's rush to fill the gap left behind by Dad.

Fuck…it was hard to believe she was thinking it, but why couldn't Joyce be more like James… James understood how to grieve for someone he loved; Joyce fucked and married the first asshole who came into her life.

"You live on the campus with… your girlfrie-… Rachel?" Max started, deciding to ask the least probing question first. "You know, I always thought those dorms were singles."

The slip brought some amusement back to Chloe as Max's face tinged with colour. Chloe arched her brows at Max as she struggled to use the word 'girlfriend'. She had an opportunity at hand to go in hard and make Max squirm like the old days, but Chloe decided to forego this… for the time being at least. That little joy was something she could save when they were caught up once again.

"There are a couple of doubles for teachers, but none of the female staff live on campus, and when
Rachel wants something, she gonna get it by any means,” Chloe sighed wistfully, her thoughts drifting back to her girl, a small smile resting on her mouth. "She scared the Principal with threats of me being unrestrained. We've been tormenting the rich girls ever since."

Max's mousy look vanished and in spite of the awkward position they were in, she managed to emit a small giggle which made Chloe's heart flutter. It was both thrilling and uncomfortable in how easy she pushed through her barriers. These were feelings she hadn't thought to have. Chloe chalked it up to her nerves. Max wasn't the short shapeless girl she once was. Well, she was short, and a little flat, but she was much more defined.

Okay… so maybe Max got hot.

Fuck this complicated shit.

"Well," she heard Max say over her musings. "It sounds like you're having quite the time there at Blackwell… Arcadia Bay seems to have survived you after all."

Chloe shrugged casually, her smile vanishing so that Max did not have it as another tool to use against her.

"Arcadia Bay can suck my fucking dick," Chloe answered, making Max blink. "The only reason I stay is because of Joyce and Rachel and her parents… but yeah, Blackwell got better when I finally had friends there… It would have been even better if you were a part of it… but you weren't, so that fucking sucked hard and even now, years later all I just wish was that you were still… my best friend conquering Arcadia Bay together and…"

Chloe felt her ability to speak die as she was left just staring foolishly at Max sitting next to her. Max just sat there, silently staring at Chloe as she seemed just as caught off guard by her ranting. The two of them remain as silent as the grave as Max turned away.

With the awkwardness adding to the tension, Chloe did what Chloe did best whenever she was forced to confront something uncomfortable without Rachel there stabbing through the awkwardness… being her better half…

She deflected.

Chloe paid attention to her instinct and reached out. She grabbed Max back into a tight hug and felt it returned immediately, unconditionally. Like the last few years never happened and it was just another day for Chloe and Max. The idea of all this wasted time made Chloe's eyes water.

Deciding Max owed her a shoulder to cry on; Chloe wiped her eyes on Max's sleeve.

"God, I fucking missed you so much, short stack…” Chloe said as she let go of Max and with a smile forced back to her face, she gave her a playful shove as she added. "I still can't believe you haven't had a serious fucking growth spurt yet."

Max jerked to her side and pushed Chloe back for the joke. The two of them laughed and Chloe watched as Max scooted back closer to Chloe. She watched as Max's small grin slowly faded into an expression of contemplation on all that she was being presented by a friend reintroduced into her life so sudden and unexpectedly. Chloe had to admit, Max was taking it well in stride.

"Chloe… I do want to be a part of this," Max affirmed swiftly. "I'm going to make this right somehow… for my part in it, … I promise that I will."

Chloe froze up as Max took her hand and held it firm between both of hers. They sat there,
unblinking as they stared at each other. Chloe's brain went fuzzy as she fought the urge to say something pissy or cruel and ruin all of this before it started again.

"I'm just… I'm not going to lie and say I'm not angry at you, and I need to work through that with you," Chloe finally spoke, keeping her tone as flat and unemotional as she could. "I need to know why you did what you did. I was going to corner you and yell until you broke down… but I'm going to give you some time before I need an answer. There are two sides to every story, and I think we both owe each other the truth… but right now, I just want us to be friends again… if that makes sense."

Max nodded and averted her eyes back to her lap. She was clearly trying to remain as put together as she could possibly be, but it was a façade which was quickly failing. Max withdrew a hand and used it to tuck her hair behind her ear.

"Jeez, Chloe…" Max mumbled all adorkably. "For my part, you have every right to hate me. I'm so sorry it came to this."

Chloe rolled her eyes. Now Max was venturing well into the deep end of her insecurity.

"I don't… hate you…" Chloe exhaled as she took Max's hand. "Damn, Max. Have we really drifted that far apart that you forgot that under no circumstances could I ever hate you? You were my First Mate. Job is still yours."

Chloe didn't need a goddamn word from Max to see that she was ready to take the mantle back up. It was a testament to Rachel's restraint to not just snap up the role herself. She spent years saying it was Max's even as Chloe bitched and moaned and believed that it was never happen. Well, here they were sitting together and Max had just said yes.

Rachel needed to be wrong once and a fucking while. It was getting annoying,

"So are you… dating Rachel or something?" Max blurted out. "You're like… really gay for her…"

Max slapped her hand over her mouth and looked ready to meltdown into apology mode. Chloe decided to spare her. She held up her hand and shook her head.

"Fuck, I hate that label, like that's just what all we are or something to others, but we aren't just that," Chloe admitted to Max with a small smile.

She paused for a moment, her smile widening slightly.

"I love her, Max. I love Rachel with all my heart," Chloe continued, her voice shifting to something a tad more serious as she looked into Max's gentle, seemingly understanding, eyes. "You'll love her too. She's smart, funny, mischievous, and sometimes she scares the living hell out of me."

"Hold the hell up," Max cut her off with a laugh escaping her lips. "The great Chloe Price is scared of someone? Damn what a time to be alive."

Max earned a slap on the thigh. It was a loud crack that made Max yelp and rub the affected area tenderly.

"Shut up, Maxhole," Chloe teased lightly. "Well, you're stuck with us now. I might be pissy, but we're never going back to how it was these four years. I won't let you… but whether you survive Rachel though… that's a whole separate thing."

Max widened her eyes and examined Chloe warily at the threat of the unknown being presented to
her. To be fair, Rachel was a daunting experience to even the most experienced of people. It was a struggle even to her to know just what was on her mind. She loved her Blood Wife, but holy fuck was she complicated. The whole Blood wife thing alone was probably nuts to the outside world.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you…" Chloe solemnly made Max a promise. "Now you got anything to eat up in this place, I'm hella starving…"

...

...

After smoking what was half a pack of cigarettes with Victoria as the two of them had given the reuniting girls their space, Rachel had decided it was time to bite the bullet and properly introduce herself to Chloe's actual best friend. The role she thought she once had, but apparently probably not anymore. Victoria… as much as she hated to admit it was right. They had no means to compete with the history those two probably had.

The best friend quandary could be saved for a later date, however. The cigarettes had given the girls enough time to figure out a strategy in how to lessen Victoria's act of foolish deception. It was decided that Rachel would go in and position herself with Chloe so that she had time to stamp out Chloe's inevitable outburst at her appearance. It would be then up to Victoria to take the opportunity to confess the truth to her. Presumably out of the house so that Chloe couldn't interfere.

All Rachel could do now was to hope beyond hope's grasped that Victoria would not fuck this up anymore then she already had. Honestly though she didn't have a whole lot of faith in Victoria. The years they have known each other had proven her to be as prideful as Rachel was once until reality hit her.

For now, there was only so much Rachel could do on her own right now with Max being a stranger to Rachel for the time being. She might have to bring Chloe in on it later if nothing were to change. Probably not, though. Chloe would probably skin Victoria kissing her First Mate.

Rachel, on the other hand, was fully ready to embrace Victoria as Max's new plaything. It made everything that much easier.

Upon seeing the two girls kiss, a weight had been lifted off her chest. Max had someone close, and it lessened the incessant jealous she got whenever Chloe spoke of her. Keyword was lessened, not relieved. Max was understatedly beautiful. There was a sweet starry eyed nature to her which Rachel envied the fuck out of it, and as much as she trusted Chloe, she still felt… inadequate.

As Rachel entered the Caulfield residence, she was immediately greeted with the sound of Chloe laughing after something charming Max had said. She paused, only long enough to pre-text out a message for Victoria to receive the moment Rachel was in place to keep Max from doing or saying anything. Only then could Victoria enter the house, use her bitch seduction skills and scoop Max before Chloe could process just what happened.

As Rachel entered the living room, she found the source of the laughter. Chloe and Max were sitting together, a bag of Lays was in between the two of them, and they were just fucking laughing as though the four years of isolation and silence hadn't happened at all. All the pain Chloe held in her heart… it was just… seemingly gone.

There was a part of her that was relieved. She had expected a screaming match, or at least a one sided one which she would have to temper, but another part of her was concerned, maybe even a
little insecure at just how quickly the two of them clicked back in place.

Chloe looked away from Max and directed her attention back to Rachel. Her eyes were shining with a brightness which Rachel had never seen before. Like everything was back to normal and now Rachel was just some annoying afterthought or something.

Rachel paused her mental gymnastics as Max and Chloe stood up. She was turning into petty little Victoria Chase. She was better than that. She was not going to get worked up over this. Not when she knew Max had her own life going on.

"Max Caulfield, this is my girlfriend and great love, Rachel Amber," Chloe made the introductions. "Rachel Amber, this is Max Caulfield, my oldest and best friend."

Best friend... Well, that was faster than she thought.

Swallowing the fear and jealousy she felt at the sight of Chloe with Max together, Rachel formed a bright smile and she pushed herself to move. She stepped forward, her arms outstretched as she surprised Max Caulfield with a warm and heavy hug just as Max gave a cute odd wave. It was the sort of hug she gave to Chloe. It was designed with a strong girl in mind, not for a fragile little bird that Max was in comparison.

So, basically that meant Chloe had gotten a face full of Rachel tits within a minute of knowing each other. It might have been a world record…

"It's such a pleasure to finally meet you," Rachel said as she pulled back to take in Max, who was now locked in a polite sort of terror. "It feels as though you and I have been friends for quite some time. I hope to make that a reality."

And Rachel had meant every word. She truly did. She loved Chloe, and wanted nothing better than her happiness. She wanted her uneasiness to be proven false, and whether she liked it or not, that meant Rachel and fucking Victoria would have to become actual friends….

"Same… and… thank you for taking care of Chloe all these years," Max finally got out, her face bright red as she looked to Chloe for help she was not going to fucking get, judging from that smug look Priceless had. "She was a handful when we were young; I can only imagine it got worse since those days."

Chloe smug expression turned into swift outrage at the charge. Rachel could not help herself. She was already starting to like this girl.

"You gotta be shitting me right now…" Chloe complained to the two girls in front of her. "…I'm pretty responsible. She's the wild one!"

Chloe gestured to Rachel, who smirked and shrugged as she let go of Max, who stumbled backwards from out of Rachel's grasp. As Rachel backed towards Chloe, she slipped one hand into her pocket and tapped the touchscreen of her phone, sending word to Victoria.

"We trade on and off and take care of each other," Rachel let slip as she wrapped an arm around Chloe's waist. "Now that you're back in her life it'll be nice to have some serious back up. You two idiots don't get to have any more stupid fucking absents. Not when I'm around, 'kay?"

"I'll be sure to give you some privacy though..." Max mumbled to Chloe and Rachel, attempting to stay as causal as she could.

Rachel didn't know why she felt the urge, but she did and Rachel embraced it. Perhaps it was Max's
sexual connotations, perhaps it was Chloe's cheeks tinting pink at her oldest friend saying something vaguely lewd; or perhaps it was just knowing something that neither of the girls knew that caught her captivation.

She leaned forward, her index finger reached out and touched Max's chin.

"…Likewise, Maxine…" Rachel purred to Max, using Victoria's pet name and watching Max twitch in front of them. "Anyways, Chloe doesn't know it yet, but she's going to be sent off doing whatever while you and I hang out solo. I'd like to get to know you without our mutual troublemaker. You and I are going to be actual friends without some moody punk girl bugging us for her constant attention."

Rachel grinned at Chloe, who looked as though she was about to have a fit. Chloe didn't like to get embarrassed, and especially not in front of Max Caulfield, who probably spent her whole early life thinking Chloe was the epitome of cool. She was cool, but she was also a total dork too.

"Come on… I'm standing right the fuck here…" Chloe muttered under her breath.

"I didn't think Chloe Price could get this frazzled to be honest..." Max confessed as she looked at the annoyed Chloe with great personal amusement.

Rachel tried her best not to look too coy. It failed.

"You spent your friendship on the receiving end, now it's time to watch the tables get turned," Rachel reminded the grinning Max with a smile of her own. "You can thank me later-"

The sound of a throat being cleared caught Max, Chloe and Rachel's attention. Standing there in the entryway was Victoria Chase. She was pale and twitchy as the full implications of her rivals being friends with the girl she loved to shove her tongue down her throat had seemed to finally fully hit her.

That was to say nothing about Chloe, who stood there frozen, her face contorted into an expression of shock and rage as she looked from Max to Victoria as though it was all just a bad dream taunting her and she was on the verge of waking up.

But it wasn't a dream. This was happening. No matter how much Chloe probably didn't want it to be.

"If you ever want to have sex again, then don't say a fucking word…" Rachel softly breathed to Chloe through her teeth as she smiled at Max embracing Victoria. It was a lie. They both knew it, but it was for shock value.

Although shock was what she went for, Chloe was mostly despondent to the threat. It seemed to be primarily because she looked as though she was about to throw up at the sight of her oldest friend and Victoria in such an intimate way. As Max let go of Victoria, she turned back to Chloe and Rachel, blushing and frazzled.

"Chloe Price, Rachel Amber, this is my friend and photography partner Victoria Chase!" Max unknowingly introduced Victoria to Victoria's quasi rivals.

Chloe went from looking like she was going to be sick, to being ready to murder a pixie cut bitch in three seconds flat. It took Rachel; pinching Chloe to direct her anger away from bloody fucking violence.

"Oh… hello…” Victoria greeted the two of them without meeting the vicious glare Chloe was
burning into her. She instead focused on Max and added. "Max... can I have a moment with you alone?"

Rachel slapped her hand over Chloe's mouth and waved the girls off. Max appeared confused, but Victoria was grateful as she grabbed Max and speedily walked her out of the room. Rachel waited until she heard the front door shut behind the girls before she let go of Chloe's mouth.

"What the *fuck* is going on?" Chloe demanded to know as she rounded back to her girlfriend.

Rachel shrugged idly. She did not have a complete picture, but she had enough to put the pieces together.

"I was right about that phone call a couple weeks ago. Victoria found a girl for real. Her name is Max Caulfield," Rachel said in her best monotone so that she did not explode from suppressed laughter. "From what I gathered she has not told Max a thing."

Chloe, on the other hand, was not feeling the humour.

"Then I fucking will..."

Rachel shook her head.

"No, you won't," Rachel informed Chloe without looking to her. "Victoria is confessing the truth to her. You're not going to interfere and certainly try to cause them trouble."

Chloe, of course, was not exactly on board with that position.

"*Ohhhh fuck that, Rach!*" she ripped back into Rachel. "Victoria is going to filter it through her *bullshit*, and Max being Max is going to eat it up because Max doesn't know how much of a fucking *snake* Vicky is. I'm not going to let that absolute CUNT fucking hurt Max any more than she already has!"

As annoying as it was to be shouted at by Chloe, nothing she had said was wrong. They knew Victoria and her ability to twist shit up so that she would be the one to come out on top. But from what Rachel had seen, there seemed to be two versions of Victoria. There was Blackwell Victoria, who was poisoned by her toxic take-take friendships; and then there was Seattle Victoria who just seemed… almost disillusioned and self-aware... and maybe terribly lost.

It was this new knowledge that had made Rachel willing to help Victoria. Maybe it was possible to bring this Seattle Victoria back to Blackwell with the right guidance. She did not know if it was possible, but they were being afforded an opportunity to at least try.

"You're not doing anything and I fucking mean it, Chloe Price," she growled to the taller girl. "You're not going to stir up shit for either of them. I know you won't believe me, but Victoria... Victoria really likes her. I thought it was bullshit too... but talking to her while you were with Max… I don't know. It feels different… it's like she cares for something beyond just how she usually is. If you respect Max, you're going to let her have this."

Chloe exhaled and shook her head.

"Max... deserves better," Chloe protested as she searched Rachel for any trace of agreement. "She... she fucking lied to Max, didn't she?"

Rachel remained silent for a moment as Chloe's sharp eyes burned into hers, demanding an answer, an acknowledgement that Victoria had done something extremely awful. Well, Chloe was right.
Victoria had done something awful, but no one had their hands cleans. Neither of them could really judge her.

"She did, and she is contrite for it," Rachel answered her, feeling a little ill that she was defending fucking Victoria of all people. "You and Max fucked up a whole lot, but you have dropped anger for the most part. Today should be about forgiveness."

"Rachel-"

Rachel shook her head and doubled down. She turned completely to Chloe and wrapped her arms around her. Above her Chloe exhaled and shook her head. She was mad and confused and terribly against this idea; but she remained still in Rachel's arm. It was a small win which Rachel would take.

"No, Chloe. It's not our call to make of who exactly she cares about," Rachel murmured up to Chloe, her mouth forming a half smile. "A long time ago, I followed my heart, and you followed your heart… so let them follow theirs as well."

Rachel watched as the anger slowly subsided from Chloe's face. She wasn't happy about any of this, but she was at least no longer in a mood where she felt Victoria was about thirty seconds from an ass kicking. As Rachel reached up to brush Chloe's cheek, she decided to make a small amendment.

"This is her one chance… she informed Chloe, who turned her attention fully to her. "But if Victoria does anything stupid to Max again, we'll deal with it together… and Victoria will be eating out of a straw for six months… deal?"

Rachel smiled at the pleased look on Chloe's face. It was nice to see that a little douse of Victoria violence could bring a smile to her love's face.

Chapter End Notes

Heyyy look who came back.

These ten days was a little less exciting than I thought it would be. Not boring enough to sit down and write completed chapters, but dull enough to sit down and outline this chapter and almost the entire Act 3 out. With an outline, it should help with update times.

Thanks for your kind words and interest as always, and I'll see you all soon!
'I know Rachel and Chloe from school; we all go to Blackwell together.' was not the confession Max Caulfield had expected to hear Victoria make.

While the confession was only one sentence, it seemed that it was all Victoria was capable of stating. Not that an elaboration was really necessary. Max quickly drew the conclusion that for weeks now, even after introducing her childhood friendship with Chloe, and youth spent in Blackwell Victoria had not only omitted the truth, but held up the façade even after Max admitted some of her greatest regrets to her, and Victoria knowingly pretended to completely ignorant of the second party in her regrets.

She wasn't entirely certain why she was surprised. She was not blind to the reaction of Chloe looking like someone had kicked her in the chest, or Rachel manoeuvring herself in place to intercede Chloe, and the fact that Chloe had screamed 'Cunt' out loud for all of the neighbourhood to hear, but to hear Victoria confirm her deceptions was still just as - if not more - painful.

So she quietly stood there, staring at the back Victoria's head. She was sitting on the front steps, her legs curled up just as it had been for Rachel as she waited for Max. She was unable to look at Max, like she was ashamed to look at her. Like her lie had finally caught up to her and she had nothing left to say until Max could pass her judgement. It explained why Victoria had called her 'Max' instead of 'Maxine', which Max had come to treasure so very much.

As upset as she might have been about this, about Victoria keeping something as important as knowing her best friend from her, how exactly could she be mad or upset? Today was the day she reunited with Chloe Price was now forced to confront a friend who she had hurt, and been irreparably altered over the course of their four years of absence from each other's lives. Like Victoria, she too had harmed someone, so for her to be pissed or betrayed… it all felt so hypocritical.

Still, while she was willing to let go with the anger she felt, she still felt entitled to understand Victoria's reasoning. She knew from the start that Victoria was all about image. She did not like to be presented in a bad light. If Chloe was a part of her school life, then that would close the gap between the public school life and the private life which Victoria was sharing with her.

With a lurch pain inside her caused from both the deception and the sight of usually confident bordering on arrogant Victoria Chase so despondent from her guilt, Max stepped closer to Victoria and took a seat next to her. Victoria smelled of her perfume and a thick cigarette smoke. It was intoxicating, and if not for what they were dealing with, Max would happily drown herself in it.

With the object of her guilt and shame next to her, Victoria stiffened up and sat straight. She looked like she wanted to look at the girl next to her; she steadfastly locked her eyes out ahead of her.

"Why didn't you think I was worthy of the truth, Victoria?" Max asked her, keeping her voice flat she folded her fingers together in her lap. She had so much to ask, but honestly between her reunion and this, she was too drained to get too deep and searching. Today Victoria and Max were fuck ups.
She had no business to get outraged.

Next to her, Victoria sighed, still she was staring straight ahead.

"...Because for the longest time, Rachel, Chloe and I have been awful to each other. Or rather, Rachel and I fought, and Chloe and I fought... it was all separate, like fighting on two separate fronts sort of thing," Victoria spoke deliberately slowly so that Max didn't get lost. "I was in a rivalry with Rachel – Little miss perfect, the mysterious girl who just knew how to twist the hearts of others with words - and Chloe... who was nothing but an annoyance. She was poor girl I looked down on. I figured Chloe was a gross fucking punk who thought she was unique and rebellious hard core and one of a kind, and she fucking isn't. All she actually is, is just another glorified hipster with a lower cleanliness standard and a bitchier confrontational attitude... she lacks your cuteness excuse..."

Max felt her stomach lurk as she felt inexplicably upset at Victoria's nasty description of her old friend. As angry as it made her feel, she had to remind herself Victoria was not talking about who she was currently, but instead who she was before they met; these were events which occurred years ago when perhaps Victoria was a totally different person.

"It got..." Victoria trailed off and closed her eyes to exhale. "It got really bad when Rachel and Price became friends, and their friendship blurred the lines between friends and... something else..."

*Something else...* Victoria had meant that it was when Chloe and Rachel started to become *Chloe and Rachel*.

"Something like us?" she confirmed, looking at Victoria straight on as she waited for an answer.

Victoria opened her eyes and at long last, she turned her head towards Max. She slowly nodded.

"I got... *fuck...* I think I got jealous, and I got... scared..." Victoria pressed on as she averted her eyes from Max's. "I started using their relationship as ammunition to hurt them, and I said awful things because it was easier to insult others then to confront what was going on with me. Eventually something happened, and I decided I was going to deescalate, and Rachel agreed and things have been frosty ever since..."

Again Max nodded. Every instinct had told her to press her luck and ask just what it was that motivated a ceasefire between Rachel and her, but the way it was said... it felt extremely personal to at least one of the parties involved. Until she made her peace with Victoria, was better acquainted with Rachel and on better terms with Chloe she would not push too far into their personal lives.

"I haven't seen her in a long time, but Chloe doesn't just let things go... does she?" Max ventured a guess, basing it on their childhood rather than anything recent.

Judging from Victoria emitting a short sarcastic laugh, Max was not far from the truth.

"She hasn't," Victoria confirmed with a sigh as she rubbed her face. "As much as I think she's awful, she... really loves Rachel. She loves her enough to – for the most part – keep her anger and mistrust of me to a minimum. Make Rachel's life a little easier... God knows she needs it."

The line between sincerity and sarcasm in Victoria's voice had blurred and left Max not sure if she was being sardonic or sincere. Whatever that was going on, she knew for sure that Victoria was not friends with the two girls. The only link to them she seemed to want to have been through Max.
"I have no excuses for not telling you, Max," Victoria spoke again, her sincerity returning to her voice as she finally found it in herself to look Max in the eye. "I... wanted to tell you. I truly did. I was too much of a coward, so I figured I could... I-I tried to push them... to come to Seattle. I didn't know they had a plan see you, I just knew they were travelling this summer so..."

"So Rachel was the voice on the phone that morning," Max finished for Victoria so she didn't fall into a raving mode.

Victoria clamped her mouth shut and instead simply nodded; confirming why it was Rachel's seductive voice had been so familiar. It was now no wonder why Victoria was so terse that morning. Between the guilt she felt and Rachel's ability to lull someone into letting their guard down. She was starting to understand just how tightly Victoria was wound up in her separation of two lives.

"I'm still really mad at you right now..." Max informed Victoria. If there was one thing which Victoria was to take away from this, it was this feeling of mistrust Victoria had held with her dealings with Max. Her failure to treat Max as an equal, as someone she could respect enough with the truth.

Victoria nodded firmly; her mouth pursed together as she looked like was waiting on the judgment to be handed down on her. Max held her eyes on Victoria's. She reached out and dropped her hand over hers. The move was enough to bring Victoria out of her self-flagellations and turn her attention to her fully.

"I'm going to forgive this... lapse of judgement," Max spoke again, a small smile returning to her face as she watched Victoria's eyes widened, "I fucked up with Chloe so much worse than what you have done. So for me to sit here today of all days and get mad at you... it would just be shitty and hypocritical."

Victoria's arms flew out and pulled Max into a tight, nearly strangulating hug. Victoria emitted a happy sounding sob as though a lot of her tension had been relived. The weeks of lies she had held onto were now no longer necessary. It was just as the old cliché went: it must have felt like a weight lifted off her.

"I swear I'll make it up to you, Max!" Victoria promised as she pulled back, her hands cupping each side of Max's face and for the first time since they arrived home, she was smiling. "Whatever you want - anything at all - you get it!"

Max's smile faltered. She shook her head. This wasn't what she wanted at all.

"I don't want you to buy me, Victoria..." she said quietly as she pulled back Victoria's hands and rested them in her lap instead. "I just... I want you to respect me. I don't want you to think you have to lie to me, even if you think you're protecting me. I want you to be comfortable with telling the truth, even if the truth may hurt me; and I'll be honest back. Lies just... fuck everything up."

Victoria's frightened smile both softened and widened. She nodded and pressed her lips against the top of Max's hand, her lips seemed almost to tremble against the flesh.

"Yes, you're right," Victoria agreed immediately as she pulled her mouth back and looked Max confidently in the eyes once again. "I'll be so honest you'll wish I lied every so often ...So... just... can be friends again?"

Max could not help herself; she stared pointedly at Victoria for making such a melodramatic plea.
"Oh my God, we never stopped being friends, drama queen," she sighed, shaking her head. "...and stop calling me Max, Victoria. You know what I prefer you to use…"

Max wasn't being nice or permissive by allowing her formal name's usage to slide for Victoria. She just still genuinely taken aback by the reverence Victoria placed in her full name. Having her revert back to Max because she was scared of her or something was off-putting in a terrible way. Like Victoria had just stopped caring for her. This was especially jarring when she did it in front of Rachel. It was as though she was even ashamed and was trying to hide her affections.

To be fair to Victoria, however, it seemed as though Rachel Amber was always paying attention to the details. It honestly kind of scared her. Just a bit though.

"Well… would you like to go out sometime, Maxine?" Victoria asked her, special emphasis placed on Max's name. "Not just a photo session… like a… you know. Something more… fuck."

Max widened her eyes. Victoria may not have meant that in a literal sense, but the thought crossed into Max's mind nonetheless. It was possibly the first time she had giving a serious thought about just the extent of where the road they were travelling would lead them to. Holding hands, kissing, dating, going steady…

And then that…

"Do you mean a date?" Max finished for her, hoping to God that it was what Victoria was broadly hinting at...

Victoria's cheeks tinged as she bit her lip and nodded. Max smiled ad leaned in, swiftly pressing her lips against Victoria's hot cheek. A date would sounded infinitely more doable than… well… doing each other.

"Just us though," Victoria swiftly amended on the spot. "If I have to drag Rachel and Price… Chloe around as chaperones, it's going to go all sideways and shit will be said and you'll get mad and I don't think we want that…"

Max nodded, that was a pretty reasonable request to make. Judging from the history between Chloe, Rachel and Victoria going on a double date was out of the picture for the time being.

"Okay," Max agreed. "But we are spending time with them, and you're going to be nice to Chloe, right?"

Victoria groaned and snorted like the idea was a terrible one. Perhaps it was to her, but it was something Max needed right now. Thankfully, however, Victoria's resistance faded swiftly and she nodded, accepting that Max needed this sort of peace in the near future. Besides, there would be plenty of time when they all returned to Blackwell… leaving Max behind in Seattle.

Damn… Everything was going to suck when September arrived…

"And there might be times where Chloe and/or Rachel will drag me off on my own," Max amended as well, watching as Victoria got even more annoyed at the prospect, even as she added. "...and you're not going to have a problem with it, right?"

Victoria was spared her response (which inevitably was going to be a yes if she knew what was good for her). Instead Victoria and Max returned back to silence as they watched Dad's truck pull into the driveway.

Immediately both of the girls untangled themselves and clambered up to their feet. They
straightened out their clothing and their attitude with one another. While they might have felt their parents would be cool with everything, they just weren't at a place to just be open yet. Yet apparently Victoria was open enough to kiss her right in front of Rachel, who was a virtual stranger to Max at the time.

Holy shit… did Victoria mark Max as her territory in front of Rachel or something?

Wowser, Victoria was fucking weird…

"Hello Dad!" Max greeted, stepping towards her Dad as he pulled out his work bag and closed the door behind him.

Victoria was three steps behind and gave Dad a small friendly wave, only to get pulled as well into the vortex of a Ryan Caulfield double hug. Victoria looked a little frustrated by it, but Max could see the smile which she could barely conceal. She lived for affection more than she would ever care to admit to.

"Hey Sweetheart, hello Victoria," he greeted with a grin. "I heard from a little birdie that a visitor is here."

Max blinked as she forgot that Mom wasn't home and the two of them were tech savvy. Of course Mom would have alerted Dad to Chloe and Rachel's arrival. He did not wait for an answer from his daughter either. He dropped his bag and cupped his hands over his mouth to create an improvised Megaphone.

"OHHHHH Doughy Chloe!" he roared out at the house. "Doughy Chloe where are youoou!"

Unable to comprehend just what it was her Dad was doing, Max blinked and turned back to Victoria. Victoria was no more in the know then Max was. She curled her lip and sort of shrugged as she too was confused by his actions. Max hoped he wasn't having, like, a stroke or something.

It took about half a minute between the time Dad dropped his hands back to his side as a shit eating grin crossed his face and the front door blew wide open and standing in the door way was an absolutely livid looking Chloe Price. She stormed out, her outrage radiating from off of her.

Behind Chloe was Rachel Amber. She was grinning like a shark. She might have been just as confused as Victoria and Max was by the nickname Dad had apparently bestowed on her, but she was well aware that anything that it had worked Chloe up into such a wild frenzy like this, it must have been good.

"What the fuck, Ryan!" she bitterly complained, her face flushed from being Dad induced embarrassed in front of her girlfriend, best friend and enemy all at the same time.

Dad was still grinning, but he glanced past Chloe to take in the sight of Rachel, luridly standing there, her thumbs hooked in her short shorts. It seemed as though she was currently fixated on Victoria and Max. Max did not know what was going on behind those hazel eyes, but she could venture a guess that she had some sort of a vested interest in making sure Victoria and Max were on friendly terms still.

"Rachel Amber this is my Dad, Ryan," Max introduced the two of them before adding. "Dad, what are you going on about?"

Chloe slammed her hand against her face and shook her head as Dad's smile only widened at the question. Honestly, this was the first time she had ever heard her Dad use a nickname for Chloe.
"Huh, I guess you didn't know…" Ryan said thoughtfully to Max, and by extension Rachel and Victoria. "Well, back when Chloe was… what were you… nine… ten? Anyways Chloe decided she was hungry and that the rainbow Play-Doh would be a suitable snack; so when I was distracted she scarfed it down. Now I didn't see it, but a couple hours later she came out of the bathroom crying and bawling her little eyes out. *Ryan come and see!* so I go and check it out… sure enough, there I am, staring at rainbow colored poop and she was convinced she was going to die. Weirdest babysitting job I ever had, so thanks for that one."

Max stared from her Dad to Chloe, who had covered her face with bother her hand. She looked ready to fucking murder Dad. Max wasn't entirely sure if she could be blamed her.

Victoria – of course - looked absolutely disgusted by the story. Yet there was sort of a smirk behind her mask of disgust. The only reason she wasn't laughing was due to the fact that she was now on her best behaviour from now on.

Rachel, on the other hand, exploded into wild, uncontrolled laughter. She doubled over, nearly shrieking at the brand new embarrassing tale she could lord over her girlfriend.

"O-oh my God… today might be the best fucking day of my life… Doughy Chloe, holy shit… literally…" Rachel stuttered out next to Victoria, looking like she was about to just have a fit right on the spot. She redoubled her laughter, an arm wrapping around Victoria's next as she struggled to breathe.

Chloe exhaled sharply and dropped her hand off her face. She was purple. Max could not help but feel a little bad for her. Her past being dredged up like this. Still… like Victoria, she too was on her best behaviour. If she was being honest, she too would be laughing…

Maybe one day, but not today.

"I'm going to kill you slowly one of these days, Lying Ryan…” Chloe announced to everyone as she glared at the father standing in front of her.

"Lying Ryan?" Dad repeated incredulously, as he grinned like he had done something particularly clever.

Chloe gravely nodded, her eyes flickered to Victoria as though she was daring Victoria to say something, anything about this. Victoria, on the other hand, was not about to take the bait.

"Yeah, because I distinctly remember you swearing you wouldn't fucking tell anyone this!" Chloe growled right back at him as she turned back to Dad.

Max watched as her Dad's grin faded and turned into a thoughtful expression as he seemed to rack his brain to see if he had indeed made such a promise to her all those years ago. After a moment, he sighed and shrugged.

"Oh… well, perhaps I did," Dad said, sounding foolish as her stared at the outraged punk girl standing there in front of him. "Well, when you get as old as I am you might forget some of the promises you make... but, oh God, kiddo... I've missed you so much."

Dad outstretched his arms towards Chloe as a peace offering. The three girls watched as Chloe stood there for a moment, seemingly contemplating whether or not he earned it. Wearily, Chloe took several baby steps forward. She looked like she wanted to smile, but her pride told her otherwise.

Yet still in spite of her own embarrassment, Chloe leaned inwards and wrapped her arms around
Dad, who tightened his own grip around her. Max dared not say anything, but she swore she heard Chloe sob into Dad. Dad was yet another person, whom she lost, and now had back in her life. As Dad quietly rubbed Chloe's back, it seemed to Max as though Chloe and Max were not the only ones who had to make up for lost time.

Max smiled as she watched the two of them together. It seemed like almost all was right in the world now.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter Chapter mostly because this Chapter got really long really fast. Next chapter will end this arc and we'll carry on from there.

Thank you for reading and your active participation. It's always touching to see a continued interest.

Next Chapter: Rachel and Max getting to know each other and Victoria vs. Chloe Round One.
As the Caulfield clan, Chloe, Victoria and Rachel ate the Chinese takeout Mrs. C picked up; Rachel could not help but feel uneasy at the tension building up in the room.

Considering the long absence from each other's lives, one might reasonably expect Chloe and Max to be the source of the tension. There was still so much left unsaid between them, yet here they were sitting next to each, laughing and chatting as though neither of them missed a beat as well as her parents who were just as enthused to have Chloe back. As Rachel picked through her almond chicken, she tried her utmost to remain upbeat about this. She wanted to give Chloe this time, no matter how much she may have… worried.

During her conversations, Chloe - of course - carefully skirted around all the troubles they had and presented them with a nice, sterile, idealized version of the past few years which Rachel (and by extension, Victoria) knew was a bullshit feel good story which was entirely meant to make the three of them feel better about their roles in compounding her pain.

The real tension, the dangerous tension was what existed between Chloe and the girl who sat next to Rachel, Victoria Chase. She started there, barely in control of her seething as passive aggressively battled for attention from her Maxine.

Victoria might have been out of most of her trouble with Max, who had mostly forgiven her; but Chloe was not going to be so easy to convince. Not with the bad blood and resentment which had simmered for years. The tension between the two of them had never really been released thanks in large part to Rachel's plea for peace which they had both honoured for her. Now here they were, mostly unable to even look at each other, and when they did it was like they were both ready to snap and kill all of the good cheer between them.

Then again, perhaps it was exactly what was needed to happen. Flare up a fight now so that they got it over with and ease into a new, more productive friendship, where they could both be able to divvy up Max's attention. It would be nice to get her girlfriend… wife… whatever they were back to her for a while.

Rachel exhaled and remembered to keep her mood in check. This time was not at all about her. It was for Chloe, and if Chloe needed Max more, so be it. She supposed it was time she could be using to get to know Victoria. All this time stabbing each other in the back, it would be strange to have this opportunity to voluntarily bond with someone who she was - at best – on frosty terms with.

"So, you go to school with Victoria?"

The question came from Mrs. Caulfield, who was looking intently at Rachel. It was obvious to Rachel that she was not exactly thrilled at her presence. Chloe, she was fine with, but Rachel was an unknown, and with her playing a role in the discomfort of Victoria – whom Mrs. Caulfield seemed to be on good terms with – she was naturally a little worried for her daughter's… friend.

"Yes. Chloe, Victoria and I are all go to the same school, but this wasn't planned by all of us. It all
just happened. Victoria and Max met at random and we were coming this way," Rachel explained, her voice as pleasant as she could be. "I can't imagine any of us being so terrible a human being to have Victoria not to tell Max that she knew Chloe just so we could surprise her."

Mrs. Caulfield nodded, somewhat satisfied with the response. Next to Rachel, she felt Victoria burning her glare into her at the back handed comment. Rachel hoped that Victoria would get used to it. It was a preview of how the rest of Chloe and Rachel's time in Seattle would be like for her. Still, there was a level of mistrust from Mrs. Caulfield and it was solely directed at her.

Rachel should have expected it, really. Chloe more or less made the claim that it was Rachel's doing that put everyone around this table together. Once again the assumption had been made that she was pulling strings. To a certain extent she had, but it was only enough to push Chloe to take the steps herself. She reminded Chloe to be brave about this, which was all she did.

Thankfully the other two people she had met today were not quite so leery about her. Mr. Caulfield was very easy-going in comparison. He had a dry, wicked dad sense of humour which her Dad lacked even before what happened to Mom. In a way knowing Ryan Caulfield was a glimpse at what William Price must have been like; and that small taste she was permitted had given her a longing to know William even more than she had before. The question of whether or not William would have loved her as one of his own would remain unanswered.

Max 'Don't call me Maxine, but it's okay if you do it, Victoria... please kiss me' Caulfield was sort of a blend of both her parents in terms of her demeanour. She was extremely on edge, having been lied to by Victoria and now sitting next to her best friend, shooting the shit like nothing had happened. Her mistrust was not directed at Rachel, but it was much more internalized. Like, she did not quite believe that this was happening.

Thankfully Max was extremely personable to Rachel in spite of their brief time knowing each other. There was this strange sort of... instinctual trust which she had for Rachel. Perhaps she knew that this was all happening because Rachel had prodded Chloe to take the first steps. Rachel couldn't wait to pull Max aside and ask her a ton of questions. It was partially out of genuine curiosity, partially to ease this bubbling jealousy. Everything told her it was wrong to feel like this, but there was still that small lingering part of her.

So what are your plans?" Mr. Caulfield asked, his cool as hell beard covering the smile he directed towards her. "If I'm to understand it correctly, you've been wandering all over the Northwest for the summer."

Rachel nodded and smiled for Max's Dad.

"Yup, we've been playing it by ear," Rachel informed him enthusiastically, as she briefly caught Max's eye. "We were thinking about heading south, make it to Cali, but Chloe and Max here are tight again so we'll be staying for as long as we can. We'll find a Hostel or something, it should be fun."

The mention of Cali caught Chloe attention. There was flash of strained guilt which Rachel hadn't meant to muster from her. Their escapades to California had always been a spur of the moment hopeful wish for her. In spite of herself, Rachel was satisfied to stay in Seattle. At least it was a proper city, and it brought a real measure of happiness to Chloe, which was an added bonus.

"Nonsense, the two of you will always be welcomed here," Mr. Caulfield answered her, sounding almost offended by the idea. "It's the least we could do. God knows we owe a debt to William and Joyce for taking on Max as often as they did back in the Bay."
The comment from the father immediately captured Chloe's attention. She looked to Ryan, who offered her a faint warm grin. Chloe smiled back and looked away. Any mention of William was usually dangerous treading ground, but from the Caulfield's it was just… different. They had a real connection to William; Rachel only had bits and pieces. There was nothing that she could do or say to make Chloe smile when the shadow of William overtook his daughter.

"Thank you, Ryan, Vanessa," Chloe spoke to the Max's parents. "We'll definitely take you up on that, but Victoria has been generous enough to open her home for us. It'll give you two some time to get used to us. I'm trouble, and then there's Rachel."

Next to Rachel, Victoria downed her glass of water; her annoyance was flaring back up.

"Understatement of the year…" she sarcastically replied, just loud enough for everyone to clearly hear.

Rachel closed her eyes. Being the only person in the room who knew exactly what was about to happen, meant that the Caulfield family was going to be in for a real treat. She probably could shut it down if she wanted to, but she was kind of on ceremony. She wanted to be Max's friend, so it was a little early to start acting up as well.

Besides, this was probably classic Chloe to them….just older and more prone to losing her shit…

"Don't mind Victoria," Chloe announced loudly, not even bothering to look at Victoria. "She has a super fragile ego. One word she doesn't like and she turns into a snivelling cow. You know, Maxie, I'm surprised you haven't seen it yet, but… she is a talented at being fake."

Victoria tilted her head as Chloe poisoned the air between them. Rachel sighed; she knew for sure it was on now.

"Oh, I guess you would know all about that… being fragile," Victoria retorted, her voice friendly, sweet even as though she was trying not to lose herself to anger. "The moment you don't get your way you start stomping around like punk trash who's never known a hard day in her life because she freeloads off everyone in her life, from her mother, to her girlfriend to her girlfriend's father. You know you can hate on me all you like; at least I'm self-aware…"

Rachel did what she perfected over the years at Blackwell, dealing with the rumour mill and the fights like this one. She tuned it all out and focused entirely. It was probably not the healthiest things to do, but it worked for her. Especially for the times when she was not allowed to express just what was on her mind.

"What is going on…?" Mrs. Caulfield asked, looking entirely perturbed by the argument Victoria and Chloe were engaged in but Rachel had refused to acknowledge up until the question was asked.

"You might as well walk away, Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield," Rachel as she stood up from her seat and stepped around the table. "They could be at this for hours… Watch this."

Rachel stopped in front of Max and offered her hand, a smile crossing on her face as she looked at little Max Caulfield and her steadily reddening face as Rachel stood over her. Max exhaled and reached out, taking Rachel's hand and allowing herself to be pulled up. She did not fight it either as Rachel wrapped her arm around her waist.

"Chloe Price, Victoria Chase," Rachel boisterously spoke to her girlfriend and Max's friend. "Maxine and I are in love and will be eloping. I hope you both don't mind!"

Max cringed in Rachel's arms and struggled to remain still and silent with Rachel clinging off her.
Chloe did not look up, nor did Victoria answer as Rachel used Max's pet name. The two of them were bickering on, leaving the Caulfield's dumbfounded by the level of anger the two of them had held for each other. If anything, Chloe and Victoria were holding back out of respect for the others.

"Come on, Max," Rachel took a step back, dragging Max with her, a small grin crossing onto her face. "Take me to the bedroom where you made Victoria Chase go weak in the knees… but seriously though, get me the fuck out of here before I make all of this so much worse for everyone."

Glancing at Victoria and Chloe and then her parents who were gathering their plates and the Chinese food so that they could eat somewhere else in peace, Max nodded and together the two of them left the two angry tall girls to their heated scrimmaging.

…

Rachel Amber was an awful flirt, and Max had no idea how to handle it at all.

Chloe might have grown up, but Chloe was still - for the most part - the same old Chloe. It took a relatively small amount of time to figure her out. Or rather, she was starting to understand her. Victoria… Victoria was a battle between two self-images which Max had known about since probably the first day that they met.

Both Chloe and Victoria were easy to figure out, but Rachel was cloaked in a sensual mystery which overwhelmed Max to a silent stupor as she allowed Rachel to lead her up to her bedroom, her hand still tightly wrapped over Max's as it seemed as though Rachel glided with a grace Max hadn't seen before. Not even from the far more expensive Victoria.

Rachel was such a visual distraction that Max did not even pause to wonder why it was that Rachel knew where her room was in the first place.

As they reached her bedroom, Max opened the door and allowed Rachel to enter first. As she closed the door, she watched Rachel kick off her shoes and plop right down on her bed as though the room already was hers. Rachel's lips curved upwards as she turned her head and noticed immediately the photograph of Max and Chloe in their younger days.

Max watched as Rachel grabbed Captain the Stuffed Bear and smirked at it slightly. The expression was enough to make Max flush, but thankfully Rachel did not speak on the matter, instead she placed the bear back down and sat up, her back pressed against the wall. Her smirk never left her face as she patted the spot next to her.

Rachel was inviting Max to sit on her own bed, worse yet Max was grateful at the invitation. She stepped forward and sat down on the edge of the bed, facing Rachel as she lifted another photo frame from the side of Max's bed and examined it.

"If you're upset with what Victoria said, don't be…” Rachel murmured, her fingers tracing over the glass frame holding the photo of young Max and Chloe from the ravages of time.

Max remained silent. It sort of did upset her to see Victoria's display of passive aggressive rage directed to Chloe in the way it did. Max Remained silent and instead saw Rachel's mouth form back into a smile as she set the photo back down.

"What you heard Victoria say is classic Victoria to be sure… but Chloe is agitating it," Rachel
informed her as she patted the spot right next to her as a massive hint. "She's trying to get a response like this. She's trying to push her buttons so that you dislike Victoria just like Chloe does."

Max remained wordless as she pushed herself right next to Rachel and folded her arms over her knees. From the corner of her eyes, she took in the details of Rachel a little closer. Notably the ugly scabbed over cut running over her hand and the tattoos covering old scar tissue.

Max kept her darker hypotheses to herself and focused on the conversation at hand instead.

"It's just, this is really weird," she confessed to Rachel, who was staring at her, her head tilted. "Chloe is my oldest friend and Victoria… Rachel, I really care about Victoria and it's kind of confusing and thrilling, and I don't want it to end but I don't want to choose."

Rachel sighed and rested her elbow on Max's shoulder like the two of them were already old friends. It was sort of comforting to have that feeling. It was sort of like she could trust Rachel with everything she held in her heart. It was a strange thing to do, and Victoria would no doubt warn her about this, but Rachel just held this… allure which made everything so much easier to discuss.

"So don't choose," Rachel spoke simply. "Don't play into their bullshit games, don't fall for their ultimatums. Take it all. Take them both as your friend and… whatever the hell the two of you are. If Chloe and Victoria make you happy, and they both respect you, then they should be mature enough to share a place in your heart."

Max ignored the small flutter she felt. This felt like the diplomatic thing for Rachel to say.

"What about you?" Max inquired softly, but the intensity was there ebbing in the background. "What do you want out of this?"

Rachel looked at Max curiously. It was sort of like she had been completely caught off guard by the question Max had posed. Max did not know Rachel, but from what she observed today, Rachel wasn't exactly the sort of person to be startled often by others.

"What I want is irrelevant in this," Rachel softly belittled her own needs as she remained locked on Max. "Chloe's been dealing with me for years. This is all for her. If I did want something… then I suppose it would be to have Chloe genuinely happy… and I don't… know if I can do that."

Max blinked as she examined Rachel closely as the older girl turned away. She could see that Rachel words hadn't at all matched with the strained expression she wore. She did not know what it was exactly Rachel had been dealing with, but whatever it was it must have been awful. The strange desire to ease Rachel's conscious washed over her.

"I don't really know you, but I don't want you left behind in this, Rachel," Max spoke delicately to slightly sullen Rachel. "I'm not… I'm not trying to replace you. God, Chloe loves you, Rachel… she adores you. She wants us to be friends, and I want that too. After everything you've done, I wouldn't do anything to get in the way of that, so if you worry about that… don't."

Max trailed off as Rachel turned back to face her. She still wasn't smiling, but her disillusionment seemed to have vanished. Replacing it was a thoughtful expression which burned into Max's heart. She seemed to be probing her, looking for any sort of insincerity which she could pounce on.

Max meant every word. She was not blind to the passion Chloe had held for Rachel. She… might have even envied it a little. The years they had had bonding had made their connection secure and so much braver than the fragile flame Victoria and Max had in comparison. They had so many more barriers to push though before they arrived at what Chloe and Rachel had.
Rachel cleared her throat; she looked a little embarrassed by her display of weakness.

"Anyways, if you like Victoria, don't fall for Chloe's attempt at revealing Victoria's mean side," Rachel pressed on, her tone brightening significantly. "I spoke to Victoria, and I think you've already done some good on her. She's a hard case to crack, but you seemed to figure it out. I have to say… its impressive how you got her to where she is at. As for Chloe, if she gets bad, you come to me. I got your back, Max..."

Max nodded. She was glad to know that she had Rachel's support, even if she had a vested interest in keeping Victoria in play. They might have been on track to achieving a friendship, but it was still young and Rachel was clearly uneasy about how fast Chloe and her had snapped back into each other's lives after a short window of awkwardness. She would have keep at it, keep showing Rachel she had no intentions on replacing her or whatever it was that kept Rachel's smile from being genuine.

"So," Rachel spoke again, as she looked around the bedroom. "As I understand it you're interested in photography... like as if you really need to answer that..."

The two of them shared a small laugh and Max nodded, a genuine smile breaking out on her face as Rachel seemed to be easing back up. It actually appeared to be that Rachel had an interest in it. If she wasn't just humouring Max, then perhaps that would be the first connection the two of them could form without Chloe being the source.

"I am," she spoke quietly. "It's nothing too serious, but I wouldn't mind going to the next level. Maybe one day though. "

Rachel nodded, her smile widened slightly as she leaned towards Max much closer than Max had expected.

"Well, if there's one friend out there you could make for that aspiration to come true… you found it..." she luridly suggested.

Max narrowed her eyes at the implication Rachel had made about Victoria and her. That wasn't at all the point of why they were friends, and the very suggestion that it had been by Rachel had incensed her more than she had expected to be.

"I would never use Victoria like that," she affirmed, her tone biting enough to catch Rachel by surprise.

Thankfully unlike Chloe, Rachel did not push it or was too proud to admit she had crossed a line. Rachel bit her lip exhaled. She nodded, her expression growing into something approaching contrite.

"I'm sorry," she apologized immediately. "I run my mouth some times. I did not mean to insult you… or Victoria, I suppose… holy shit, can't believe I said that last part."

Rachel pulled her head back and ran her hand through her luscious blonde mane. She eyed Max carefully, like she was making a decision on the spot. It made Max more nervous than she ever thought she would be.

"I would like to see your work sometime," Rachel suddenly declared. "You know… I used to have this crazy idea that I could pull off modeling. Now I think I found the right photographer to come along and kick start that idea back up… do you think-"

"You totally could!" Max blurted out before she could censor herself.
As Rachel arched her eyebrows, Max felt the overwhelming urge to run from the room screaming. She hadn't meant to say that. Well, she had, but she had meant for it to come out far cooler than it did. Now here she sat staring stupidly at Rachel who looked as though Christmas had come early or something cliché like that. Rachel remained silent, and in so doing she only served to drive the embarrassment deeper into Max.

"Well… I mean, you have the right look..." Max hoped to play down. "Maybe we could have a session or two… without Chloe and Victoria breathing down our necks…"

Thankfully Rachel was not feeling too cruel when she easily could have drawn this embarrassment Max was drowning in out for all it was worth. She instead took pity and nodded, smiling faintly.

"Name a time and a place and we'll totally chill and shoot together," she agreed happily. "Vic-bore-ria and Doughy Chloe could spend that time learning to be friends themselves… maybe."

Although she nodded and held the exact same sort of hope which Rachel held, Max really had to doubt that…

Chapter End Notes

This was delayed a little. My bad. With all the characters now together, there is an added measure of complication of how to figure out the right sort of interactions. It'll smooth out soon enough though.

Thanks as always for reading!
She had no idea what Rachel Amber was doing upstairs with Maxine, but Victoria didn't like it under any circumstances.

Sure, Rachel might have had an interest in keeping Maxine and her together, but Rachel also had a big fucking mouth and the audacity to assume that she could talk about anything she liked and would get away with it. Mostly because that usually was the case for literally everything she did. No one dared challenge precious Princess Rachel and if you did, her personal bitch girl would snap on her behalf.

For now Price and Victoria had disengaged from each other. Price wandered off and was charming Ryan and Vanessa from the sounds of it. She was probably regaling them with old memories and new stories. It seemed as though she was already reintegrating herself back into their hearts in an attempt to push Victoria back out of the limelight. She was probably putting in the good word for Rachel so that Rachel would be far better received because it was obvious as fuck that Vanessa wasn't going to be swayed by a smile and a nice pair of tits like Ryan instinctively was.

So there Victoria sat, all alone in the kitchen, scrolling through her phone and attempting not to have a panic attack at the thought of all her efforts with the Caulfield's going up in smoke because of Chloe fucking Price and by extension Rachel, her anger flaring as she heard Maxine's sweet laughter from upstairs. That was laughter SHE should have been the cause of.

Victoria sighed and berated herself. Now she was just being petty, and jealous of Rachel. Something she had no business to be. Not now that precious Rachel had gone ahead and gotten tacky fucking tattoos probably at the behest of her tacky and trashy girlfriend. Victoria, on the other hand, was unblemished Goddess and fucking hot. Rachel wasn't competition anymore, she was just another Arcadia Bay trash queen. Why would a goddess like her compete with someone like her anyway… Maxine would know she'd be trading down and-

Mentally Victoria screamed at herself; she was doing again! God-fucking-dammit she needed a cigarette to calm her nerves. She just… hated this. Hated the idea of having to be vulnerable in front Rachel and Price (especially Price) because of her relationship, or whatever it was with Maxine.

She had to be rational about all of this now. If she wanted to survive the rest of the summer with Rachel and Price breathing down her neck, she had to be. Rachel and Price were pretty faithful to each other. The likelihood of them plotting to undermine her so they could steal away Max seemed unlikely. So why exactly was she this worked up over it?

The only answer she seemed to have right now was that these two had the ability to spill things she didn't want to and considering their sordid history, Victoria doubted very much that either of them were too keen on being tactful about her secrets. Maxine might have been okay with a one-off display of forgiveness for the lie, and while Maxine knew how awful she could be, that didn't cover everything. The details they could spill… the fact that they had saved her from an overdose, the bitch behavior she not only condoned, but encouraged and rewarded in her friends.
Victoria had a mountain of reasons for Maxine to cut her losses and run; and everyone but the Caulfield's knew it.

So there she was, right back at the beginning; having to go out of her way to shine up the egos of those two ruthless bitches. Worse yet, Maxine felt obligated to shine up them as well for her failures. She would not put it past Price (Rachel still had her reasons to keep Victoria around) to deliver an ultimatum to Max: Chloe or Victoria.

If it came down to that, and If Victoria was being honest, she would not be the least bit surprised if Maxine chose Chloe. Victoria was, after all, a blip on the radar compared to their brief time as friends… or whatever.

So, Victoria did what Victoria did best. She expected the worse; she tempered her expectations with a terrible doubt. Even if she had Rachel in her corner, Rachel's first priority was Chloe's happiness and if Chloe suddenly decided she wanted Victoria exposed so that Maxine could see what Victoria was before she met her, then Rachel would shift back to Chloe's side faster than she could blink. Alliances with a manipulator were always something to suspect for treachery.

"You know, you could join us if you want to."

Victoria looked up from her phone and ceased her commiserating as she realized Ryan was in the kitchen once again, a pitcher of lemonade in hand and a couple of glasses in the other. His words might have been spoken lightly, but there was a concern etched in his expression. It was sort of like he was genuinely worried for her self-imposed exile. Perhaps he was. In the time that she had known Ryan, she had observed him to be nothing less than the archetypal Dad... Dad jokes and all.

Unable to stop herself, Victoria smiled slightly. She was seeing exactly where Maxine got her compassion from.

"Thanks," she said, fumbling to show off her phone to Ryan. "I'm just… I'm just making calls and organizing things on my end so that Rachel and Price… Chloe can stay over."

Ryan's expression lightened at the mention of Chloe, and Victoria just wanted to run away as yet another person she had come to like had fallen back under the charms of the punk so quickly. She supposed that she had to be fair to Ryan for his history with Chloe, but it was just so fucking obnoxious that Chloe could just worm her way into the hearts of everyone. Everything felt like a battle to Victoria to gain any semblance of respect from others.

Some people were naturally charismatic, some weren't… and apparently Victoria fell into the latter category.

Victoria averted her eyes back to her phone so that Ryan had an excuse to leave. He did not take the way out. He instead stood there for a moment before he set the pitcher and the glasses down and approached her. He sat down next her, his eyes still examining her, making Victoria uncomfortable from just how concerned he appeared to be for her. Not a lot of people in the world did something like this for her. The presumption that Chase could never be shaken was an image that prevailed partially due to her own behavior. The truth was a little more human than that.

"It's nice of you to put aside your differences with Rachel and Chloe for Max," Ryan addressed her in a low reassuring voice which killed Victoria's urge to refute. "It shouldn't be needed to be said, but I know she appreciates it... as do I and Vanessa, and yes so does Chloe…"

As Victoria rolled her eyes at the mention of Price, Ryan merely smiled. Victoria felt like he and by extension Vanessa knew that something was different about Maxine and her, but neither of them
were about to voice it until Maxine decided it was time to at least address it. It left her in an awkward place of sitting there with a Dad whose daughter she had grown to be fond of.

"Yeah... I'm a real fucking saint," she muttered, not at all caring that she as swearing in front of an adult who wasn't her parents. "Feel free at any point to explain why I want to just hog Max to myself, why I think Chloe has no right to hide behind any excuse she has as to why she didn't contact Max either... I'm not good at all."

She felt stupid and a little overdramatic, but that was just how she felt about all of this. It was stupid, childish and stupid for someone who was nearly seventeen years.

"Besides Rachel and you, there is no one in this home who is not to blame for their absence from each other," Ryan replied, his voice steady as always. "Don't take the burden of unfiltered honesty alone. I think you're a better person than you give yourself credit for, Victoria."

Ryan emitted a humourless laugh as Victoria sat stunned by the reassurance he had offered her. It was... nice to have the validation.

"Believe it or not, all of this wasn't exactly a transfer of upper middle class wealth from Arcadia Bay to here," he pressed on, sweeping his hand across the kitchen. "I had to make a decision for my family, and it's going to bother me for a very long time to come to know that it had such an effect on others... It all should have been handled better then it was."

Ryan's words slipped away from him and he fell silent as a pained expression formed on his face. It appeared as the memories of had happened finally catching up to him. He was not weepy, or apologetic for the decisions he had to make, but he was filled with an obvious regret.

"Vanessa and I owe so much to Chloe, to Joyce and to William. More than the girls realize, I think..." he trailed off and hastily added in a much more official tone. ". . .Anyways, do you need anything?"

Victoria looked up and noticed that the kitchen was no longer private. Price had walked in and without a single word of acknowledgement to either of them as she went to pour herself a glass of water. Her very presence was an irritant to Victoria. She was having a moment with Max's father and here Chloe was interrupting it.

"Actually yes..." Victoria spoke up, reverting her eyes once again back to Ryan. "Would it be okay with if Chloe and Rachel leave their truck here? I know that its stinking trash heap, but it's not exactly Mercer Island material..."

The words made Chloe stiffen up as the slight against Chloe's vehicle hung over everyone's head. Next to her, Ryan looked completely startled by the viciousness laced into Victoria's voice. She didn't want to do it, but her annoyance at the punk girl overrode all common sensibilities she possessed.

"Wow you went ahead and said it," Ryan said a little startled. Nonetheless he looked to Chloe, who was pissed and added. "Chloe, when you take off you can park it in the garage."

Chloe looked ready to freak out, but she realized quickly that the two of them obligated to be on their best behavior. Especially when Maxine's father was sitting right there, looking both startled and amazed by just how much tension the two of them could build in such a short span of time. It even surprised Victoria somewhat.

"Sure thing, Ryan," Chloe found her voice again, as well as her seemingly unshakable confidence.
"Arcadia Bay trash sticks together. Not like some posers we know..."

Victoria's cheeks tinged pink as Ryan and Chloe used their history to tease and taunt Victoria. Ryan was probably more innocent, but Chloe meant it. It seemed like she was lording her poorness over Victoria as though it was something Victoria had never experienced was well inside Price's modus operandi. She hadn't... but Chloe didn't have to rub it in her face.

"So it would seem," Ryan spoke through the laughter as she stood up. He glanced to the thoroughly embarrassed Victoria and smiling lightly, he dropped his arm around her shoulder and added. "Don't worry, Victoria, I got your back... everything you want to know about Chloe's childhood is yours."

That shut Chloe up nicely, and with that the triumphant smirk returned to Victoria's face. It was a very wonderful feeling to have this level of support on her side.

"I think you told enough already..." Chloe muttered mutinously at Ryan as he released he grip on Victoria grabbed the pitchers and glasses once again.

"Oh I'm just getting warmed up, kiddo..." he replied lightly and with a wink to Victoria, Ryan left the suddenly flustered Chloe and the reinvigorated Victoria Chase.

Perhaps it was all not quite a lost cause after all.

...

...

As Ryan left the room, Chloe stood there in silent contemplation at the smug as fuck Vic-bor-ia Chase sitting at the counter, her phone in one hand and her other fixing her stupid ugly pixie cut with the other.

To say that she was coming to terms with Victoria Chase not only as Max's friend, but as apparently as something resembling her pre-girlfriend was difficult to rectify. The two of them lacked anything in common. Victoria was a domineering rich, popular girl fucking degenerate and Max was, by all she saw in the whole five hours since they reunited, was a bit of a straight edge with a hipster complex. It was everything that Victoria railed against, and yet here she stood in the Caulfield house trying to make nice with Chloe and Rachel for real.

But no matter how hard Victoria tried, it was something Chloe was going to let go. Not until she was sure that Max was safe even sharing the same room with that snake in cashmere, who had in three weeks seduced Max to her side. She was definitely not about to draw any sort of comparisons to herself and Rachel.

That certainly wasn't what was happening here; not at all... not at fucking all.

Chloe simmered her annoyance once again. She remembered her promise to Rachel. She would not stir up a dramatic showdown in front of the Caulfield clan. The last thing she needed to do was embarrass herself any further after fucking Bitch-toria successfully goaded her into a fight in front of Max and her parents.

So she stood there, staring at the slinky Blonde, who continued to just stare at Chloe like she was not worth. There was an intimidating power to Victoria, which Chloe would never admit to, but it scared the living hell out of her. At times it rivaled Rachel's ability to twist her up. He two of them, it felt almost impossible to keep up with them. Perhaps that was why she resorted to rage. It was
the only emotion she had that could even begin to compete with the likes of Rachel and Vic-whor-ia…

With everything on her mind, Chloe could not help but wince. Perhaps that wasn't a good name to use… it would bother Max, and in spite of her mistrust and dislike of Victoria, she was not going to denigrate Max like that.

Chloe watched in silence as Victoria pushed herself off the seat, her arms crossing over her chest as slinked forward to face down Chloe. There was no fear of the stronger girl, no shyness, it was a projection of power which Chloe one hundred percent fucking believed was real. She did not have Max or Ryan and Vanessa, or even her deal with Rachel to keep her from going full tilt at her.

"Back for another round, Price?" she glowered, her voice low and silky. It was toned in a way which startled Chloe in a way she never had expected.

"Yeah," Chloe spoke as she glanced back to see if Vanessa or Ryan were close by. "We have bidness to discuss before those two come back."

Victoria blinked as Chloe rubbed her neck. That… didn't come out quite as smooth as she thought it would be. The only good that came from it was the expression of annoyance which flashed over Victoria's face, but even that wasn't what she wanted right now.

"What the fuck ever," Victoria snapped back as she pushed by Chloe. "Can we wait until you're done talking like a complete fucking idiot?"

Chloe stepped back several paces and blocked Victoria's path once again. Victoria's anger flared as she stopped and crossed her arms over her chest. She stood there in silence, glaring sharply at the punk girl keeping her away from heading upstairs to interrupt Rachel and Max's time together.

"I'm serious here. You got off lucky because Max is too nice a person to not let it just slide. I don't have that problem," Chloe informed Victoria, her tone biting as she stepped forward to intimidate Victoria a little more. "I don't know what the fuck you two are, but I promised Rachel that I would hurt you. If you lie or just be your usual fucking awful self, I will hurt you."

Victoria narrowed her eyes. Her expression softened for a moment as she carefully inspected Chloe for what she had said to her. It wasn't a respect which cooled her down. Victoria was too much of a fucking snob for that. No, she cooled down because she seemed to respect the sentiment.

"If I hurt Maxine again, I'll present myself to you voluntarily," Victoria moodily promised. "Is that all you needed to say to me?"

Chloe bit her lip and nodded. Yeah… she supposed that was the only thing that really needed to be said. It was probably for the best. The sooner they were back to not talking to each other the better. Her cards were laid plainly for Victoria to see.

As Victoria cleared her throat, Chloe turned back to face her… apparently it was her turn to talk.

"I get that you fucking hate me, and to be honest you are a fucking pest I could do without too," Victoria muttered out loud to the older girl. "But I care for Max, and if that means I have to put up with her choice in a friend, I'll do that for her."

Without warning and quicker than Chloe's hung over mind could react, Victoria reached out and grabbed Chloe by the collar of her shirt and dragged Chloe down to her knees. With widened eyes Chloe stared up into the fury of Victoria Chase.
Chase’s grip tightened and she leaned forward, their noses nearly touching.

"I want you to fucking remember before you get self-righteous like you always do, that at any point in the last four years you could have picked up the phone, but you didn't," she growled brutally at Chloe, who remained shocked at the position she was in. "Instead you moped around like you always do; and let's face it. You were moving on from Max until Rachel meddled into your affairs. Now here you are, not only just reasserting yourself into her life, but purposefully trying to fuck up everything I have spent this summer building with her: a friendship, a potential future career… something more… but no, the nostalgia train is rolling for you, and under most circumstances I would be fine with Maxine wanting to rekindle a friendship, but here you are trying to make her hate me."

As resistance from Chloe built up, Victoria went silent and gave Chloe a solid shake, breaking her attempt before it even got underway. If Chloe did anything, there would be a fight and the illusion of civility between the pair of them would be broken, and neither of them wanted that. So Chloe relaxed and glared up at the girl, attempting to remain cool in the face of a growing uneasiness she felt at the sight of Victoria's terrible rage.

Victoria blinked, and exhaling hard, she let go of Chloe's shirt. She did not move however, choosing to give her freedom, but not to undermine her superiority over Chloe. It was strange. She didn't look satisfied, but there was no guilt for her actions either.

"I know that you've only ever had Rachel as a friend these past few years, and she'd condone this behavior because it benefits her, but in case you forgot. Isolating her, playing mind and guilt games… turning people against each other; that isn't what a friend does," Victoria spoke again, her voice simmering back from the rage she held before. "The worst part… the absolute worst part is that you needed this fucking lesson from me of all people."

As she returned briefly back to silence, Victoria backed away from Chloe, and with that, Chloe immediately launched herself back up to her feet. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and start fucking swinging at her for this embarrassing moment.

But she didn't. Not when deep down she felt a truth ring out from Victoria's words.

"I'm sorry that you lost your Dad, Price. I truly am. But losing him doesn't give you a free pass to shift all the blame to Maxine, like somehow she's the only guilty party because that would be so fucking typical of your inability to accept responsibility for your own role in the missteps," she continued. "Yes, she fucked up, but she was in just a fucked up situation with Ryan having to take her, and while she did wrong you fucked up too if you really wanted to be her friend by just giving up; So you better keep that in mind before you start arbitrarily shitting on her for her part in the future."

Too stunned to speak from Victoria referencing her father, Chloe remained glaring as the two of them heard footsteps and Rachel's laughter approaching them. Running out of time, Victoria stepped close again and poked Chloe hard in the chest. Her expression reformed into rage as she stared down Chloe once again.

"And by the way, if you hurt Maxine, or make her cry or guilt her so badly that I never get to see her smile again untainted by you, I will fucking bury you at sea, you miserable bitch…" she hissed only loud enough for them to hear it.

As Max and Rachel entered the kitchen, the anger in Victoria's face vanished. It was replaced with joy as she turned away from Chloe and directed her attention to Max, who stood there a little bemused at the sight of Chloe and Victoria standing as close as they were. Rachel was staring too,
but she was a tad more wary at the sight of them.

"Hey there hipster girl, ready to go?" Victoria greeted Max like she hadn't been a complete fucking lunatic moments prior. "Sleepover with all my new BFFs! Tonight is going to be such a blast!"

Max looked as though Victoria had grown a second head. She glanced to Chloe next, who shrugged and smiled as confidently as she cold, like everything was alright and Victoria hadn't spooked the shit out of her.

"Sounds good," Max finally spoke to Victoria as she turned back to her friend once more. "I'm going to go say goodnight to Mom and Dad… coming?"

Victoria smiled and together, Max and Chloe left the kitchen to seek out Vanessa and Ryan. With them gone, Rachel and Chloe were left standing alone; Rachel looked like she wanted to laugh as Chloe struggled to remain in control of her growing anger.

"What was that about?" Rachel asked coyly as the two of them watched Max and Victoria leave the kitchen.

All Chloe could do was groan at the fucking mess she was in. The situation with Victoria was so fucking fucked. She seemed to have pulled out all the stops, and as much as she might have hated her, she had to sort of respect her commitment to striking a balance between compassion and being a total cunt

"I think we came to an understanding… at least for tonight," Chloe muttered back as she wrapped an arm around Rachel's waist. "Remind me to never fuck with Victoria for real. Bitch is crazy… crazier than you."

Chloe watched as Rachel's coy look turned into one of smug satisfaction. It was almost as if she actually seemed to approve of Victoria's behavior.

"I think you're just mad she put you in your place," Rachel pointed out as she reached up to kiss Chloe's cheek. "You do know you might have deserved it, right?"

Rachel pulled away and followed after Victoria and Max, one finger gesturing her to follow, but leaving the taller girl a little stunned. Once again Chloe groaned as she ran her hand over her face briefly before she followed after her girlfriend. Silently she hoped that Victoria's display wasn't something Rachel had encouraged her to do…

Scratch that… Chloe fucking knew this was Rachel's handiwork.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long to come out. My laptop finally died on me after years of service. I have a new one coming in on Monday or Tuesday, so I have been writing on a phone, which sucks. might have more errors than usual as a result. Sorry again.

Thanks as always for reading, and I'll see you hopefully sooner.
Max Caulfield opened her eyes as her dreams faded away and instead she found herself in a far weirder reality than anything her imagination could dream up.

Through the sleepy fog of bare bones consciousness, it was hard to believe that the events of yesterday had transpired. The very idea of Chloe Price showing up on her doorsteps and their reunion going over smoother than she had even hoped to anticipate seemed like an impossible one to think of. With the reunion came an unexpected by-product. She had gained a new friend in Rachel Amber. She was a mystery which she would try to at least try to unravel.

All that could wait for now, she was just happy to have Chloe back in her life. Forever how long that would be, she would take it. Still the idea of Chloe, Rachel and Victoria returning to Arcadia Bay in a little over a month from now had left her envious and full of regret that she had left the Bay in the first place. God it made the very concept of September that much painful for her to focus on.

She directed her attentions back to her other lesser concern. Victoria had known Chloe all this time and hadn't told her. It was a probably that Victoria decided she could not trust her with the truth, but Max was in a forgiving mood, and Victoria seemed to be genuinely contrite, and with everything that happened, the idea of punishing Victoria seemed so wrong and unfair.

That part of the day sucked, but at least they were back once again on path to… God, what were they? She probably had asked herself this question every other hour since they hooked up, or whatever. Yet she still did not have an answer to the question. She supposed she would have to wait for that when Victoria finally took her out on their non-photographic oriented date.

Max felt a small chill run through her body as a gust of wind blew through the open window. Now, if she had a blanket, she would be fine no problem. But she didn't all thanks to the girl she was sharing a bed with. Victoria Chase, as it turned out, was a notorious blanket stealer in her sleep. The idea of having to share such a precious thing was tantamount to heresy. It was a habit that Max would have to try to break if they continued this, or at the very least bring her own blankets… but she wouldn't put it past Victoria to steal it either.

Victoria Chase was, as it turned out, very high maintenance. Not that she minded of course. The challenge ensured it was never boring for her.

The bed shifted slightly as Max stretched and pulled herself up with a yawn. It was enough of a disturbance to Victoria's beauty sleep to elicit a flustered grunt from the blonde still rolled up in several layers of blankets. It was enough to make Max smile that the Queen was awake and not particularly thrilled about the lack of Max at her side.

"And where are you going…" Victoria grumbled into her pillow without bothering to stick her head from out of the blankets.

"Need my H20 fix…" Max answered Victoria through her yawn. She emitted a faint smile as she added, "…and a good morning to you, blanket thief."

From beneath her comfy hiding place, Victoria growled a cute little growl just for Max, which
made Max a little weak in the knees. Max had to admit, that Victoria was pretty fucking adorable for cosplaying as a burrito. Max knew better then to point any of this out of course. It was too early for Victoria to get upset.

"My bed, my rules, Max… I thought you'd know that by now…" Victoria answered her; her voice was high and tinged with an undercurrent of sleepy amusement.

Max tilted her head at the use of her shortened name. Perhaps Victoria would be finally comfortable to use both.

"You do it when you sleepover at my place as well, though…" Max felt she had to point out, unable to hide the small smile building up.

That did it. Victoria popped her head to through the gap that had once been just a mess of her blonde hair. She looked almost offended at the suggestion that Max had made against her.

"Look Caulfield, if the payment of blankets is compensated with me gracing your single bed with my body, then I am severely undercharging you," Victoria snapped back her.

Deciding not to engage her anymore, Max bit her lip and turned to leave, only for her to be glomped by Victoria, who forgot her need to be comfy and instead pushed her arms around Max, keeping the brunette on the bed. Max could not help but blush, which remained thankfully unseen. Victoria's off white nightie was thin and she could feel everything Victoria's body had to offer her.

They remained like this for a little while. Max remained silent as she just knew Victoria was working up her nerve to say what was on her mind. Silently she looked down and allowed herself to fiddle with Victoria's long, slender fingers. She felt Victoria shift behind and suddenly, she felt those soft lips of her touch against her shoulder and slowly trailed up the side of her neck.

As Max emitted a small laugh, Victoria came to a pause and rested her forehead against the back of Max's head.

"Sorry, I'm not exactly a morning person…” she breathed shyly. "So… tell me, Maxine, is having Price… Chloe back in your life all that it is cracked up to be?"

Max allowed Victoria a small nod, closing her eyes and exhaling sharply as Victoria nudged her with her sweet little button nose.

"Yes, it is…” Max conformed quietly to the girl behind her. "… but just because she's back doesn't mean you get to go anywhere. I really like you, Victoria… Chloe's opinions can't change that."

There was a strange reaction to her words. Victoria did not reply at her. It was a rare thing - to shock her into silence - because Victoria was pretty much geared for quick, clever and vicious responses to anything hurled against her. She was sweet in these moments, like a submissive little kitten caught off guard. These moments rarely lasted, so Max enjoyed them with as much savouring as she could.

"Oh… well… good… If you're happy, then so am I…” Victoria sort of stuttered out. She took a deep breath, her chest heaving against Max's back.

Victoria released Max, and carefully turned her around. Max immediately noticed how flushed she looked in the morning light slowly flooding into the room. Victoria leaned forward, drawing in Max as she pressed her lips against Max's softly.

As Victoria pulled back, her face tightened up, but her eyes remained soft and gentle as she gazed
with a tilted head at Max. Max felt her IQ points dropping by the second as she wanted nothing better than to let pure animal instinct take over and pin the tall girl underneath her. She wanted Victoria Chase that she too was every bit as capable as asserting her own brand of dominance over her.

But... she wavered and swallowed her desire back. There would always be another time for those things...

"Since you're getting up, would you please get me a Perrier?" Victoria requested as a small smirk crossing over her lips. "Ooh and one of the chilled glasses in the refrigerator... thank you, Maxine..."

As Max nodded blankly, Victoria leaned in and swiftly planted a kiss once again before she withdrew and collapsed onto the bed, rolling herself back up into her blanket, leaving Max to leave. A little confused and a little turned on by all of this.

...

Closing Victoria's door behind her, Max recollected her thoughts and attempted her best to push the mental image of Victoria in her nightie from out of her thoughts. They were something to think about later. For now she had bigger things to focus on.

The first and foremost question she had was why exactly the light was on in Chloe and Rachel's room this early in the morning.

Usually a sleepover constituted all parties sleeping together in the same room. Victoria, however, forewent the standard tradition and instead went out of her way to get the two of them a room of their own. Partially because Max and Rachel were going to be living out of this home more often than not, partially because Victoria had wanted to keep her to herself, which was thrilling to say the least. The third and final reason was because Victoria didn't want to have to hear them if things... heated up. Heated up was code for sex, and apparently Victoria had to listen to a whole lot of it while they were at Blackwell. Victoria even said that the two of them had sex while she was asleep in the same room after a party they hosted.

The thought of Chloe and Rachel... Doing that was a startling one. Something she hadn't really considered until Victoria said it. Yes, Max supposed sex was a pillar to a healthy personal relationship.

Yes... it was looking as though that was something which both Victoria and she would probably end up doing. Not that she would be any good at it. Holy Jeepers that might have been a while off but it wasn't any less nerve wracking for her to think about especially when Victoria was a gorgeous, albeit a blanket stealing and bossy, girl.

For a moment she was tempted to knock on the door, and see if Chloe was up. Then Max remembered that this was Chloe she was thinking about waking up. As bad as Victoria might have been, it was nothing compared to what happened when she woke Chloe up before 6 in the morning when they were kids, and like a lot of things, she doubted that got any better with age.

As Max started to leave, she heard the sound muttering coming from the other side of the door. It was softer than Chloe's voice, so Max used her great detective skills to deduce that that it was none other than Rachel Amber talking lowly so not to disturb the sleeping dragon that was Chloe Price.
She supposed it was only right to leave Rachel to the conversation she was having. So why was it that she hadn't left?

It was probably because she was a self-professed enormous snoop and just needed to listen in. Not about to fight her own nature at 5:30ish in the morning, Max slinked forward and pressed herself up against the door. Carefully she listened to the sound of Rachel's voice become clearer.

"-Yeah, I think we're going to be hanging out in Seattle the rest of the summer. Bouncing between a couple places by the looks of it... yes, Victoria is here... that's where we are right now. Yes Sera... we're being polite... no Chloe hasn't punched out Victoria... yet... one second, something fun is about to happen..."

The door opened up suddenly and Max fell flat on her face inside Rachel and Chloe's room.

As Max groaned through her pain and rolled flat on her back, she looked up to see Rachel standing above her, her phone in one hand, Rachel's free hand resting on her hip. She was wearing a white long under shirt that probably belonged to Chloe and short swimming shorts. She did not look angry, or even bothered by Max. It seemed as though Rachel seemed to never be angry ever. She was, however, looking very amused by this embarrassment Max literally stumbled into.

Rachel hunched over, bending at her knees, placing herself squarely over Max and right into her face. Looking like a cat that ate a flight of canaries, she reached out idly with her free hand and gently tapped her finger against Max's nose like she was just a new plaything for Rachel to prod at her discretion. Who knows, perhaps that was the truth.

"What's a cute lil brunette doing standing at my door this early in the morning?" Rachel played with her in a low, entrancing tone. "You know if I didn't know better I'd think you had ideas..."

"I'm sorry!" Max sputtered out before Rachel could continue to twist the knife any further into than she already had. "I was just out and I thought I heard something... and I'm sorry-"

Rachel silenced her with a finger pulled from the tip of her nose and was rested instead against Max's lips. She sat there above Max, her hazel eyes hypnotically gazing into her. It left her unnaturally relaxed. Like she was ready to listen to whatever it was Rachel wished. Wowser the sway she possessed... it was little wonder why Victoria didn't trust her, and it made Max appreciate Victoria's resolve all the more.

"You know, Chloe warned me that you were a snoop, but I thought she was joking around..."

Rachel commented slyly. "Oh well, come on I got you.

Rachel stood back up and offered out her hand, Which Max immediately accepted. Before she knew it Rachel dragged the smaller younger girl back to her feet and snapped her right into Rachel's body. Rachel did not seem to mind the personal space interference, and instead wrapped her arm around Max and held her in place. She raised her phone up as she rested her head on Max's shoulder.

There on the screen was a face. She was an older woman with long blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. She looked both amused by the sudden appearance of Max and tired. It was after all the early morning, and it looked as though she was on her break. The outfit she wore was an outfit which she would never forget. She worked at the Two Whales.

"Sera, this is my new friend, Max Caulfield. She's probably the other reason why Chloe is such a sweetheart, factoring out William," Rachel introduced with a small sigh. "Max this is Sera. She is one of the very few reasons I'm returning to Arcadia Bay for."
Max wasn't sure exactly what to do. So she decided to just wave at the Facetime connection awkwardly.

"Hello," she greeted the woman named Sera, not at all sure what else to say.

The woman in Arcadia Bay smirked, and it was extremely familiar looking…

"Hello, Max," the woman spoke with a tight control buried underneath in her voice. "It's always nice to finally put a face to the name. Chloe has had nothing but nice things to say."

Max's cheeks tinged pink at the thought of Chloe already talking about her to this woman and to Rachel as well. God, Rachel and Chloe knew each other for the better part of two years. That was plenty of time for Rachel to know all of Max's most embarrassing moments when they were children.

Rachel sort of smiled and released her grasp on Max and allowed the smaller girl to scoot away from her. As Rachel turned her back to her Max caught the sight of a massive network of vines tattoos poking through the holes in her ratty –likely Chloe own – sleeping shirt.

"I'm going to get back to talking," Rachel said, gesturing to her phone one again. "Chloe is downstairs smoking I think. Could you bring me up a glass of water when you come back up?"

Max arched her eyebrow as a wave of déjà vu washed over her.

"Jeez, am I a maid now?" Max sheepishly asked, speaking more to herself as she turned away. "I thought that was something girlfriends do for each other…"

Rachel shrugged, still smiling that sweet menacing smile.

"Under most circumstances you would be right," Rachel answered her. "But this time you are if you want to continue to snoop on me…"

"You're not bossing Max around, Rachel," Sera snapped out from all the way out in Arcadia Bay. "You're a big girl now; you can get a drink for yourself."

Rachel blinked at the sudden order that had been snapped out at her. It was sort of like she had never expected something like that from Sera. In her world, it seemed that Rachel was always the one in charge, whatever the case was, Max was glad to have the woman on her side.

"Dude, Sera you kick ass!" Max praised and quickly fled the room before Rachel had time to regroup.

…

The distinguishable sound of Courtney Love shrieking from the kitchen wasn't exactly what Max thought was to be an appropriate morning wake up call, but judging from her first impression of the new and improved (?) Chloe Price, this was very in character with her.

As Max approached the kitchen, there was still a high level of tension and fear coursing through her. Just because Chloe and she had a good first day, did not constitute a total shift in their relationship. Chloe was still mad, still tense about the roll Max had to play; and rightfully so, too. It all seemed so foolish that she allowed her anxiety to get the better of her.
They were in a weird place, of that Max had no doubt, but it didn't have to be like this forever. They would work through it together -Even if it meant having to deal with a moody Chloe directing her anger at her. She would live through it and push past it. Getting this second chance thanks to Rachel's intervention… she would not waste this. She would make every wrong right and she would be back in her best friend's good graces once again.

Chloe had her back to her, her head bobbing as like Rachel she had her phone in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. She did not know the policy of the Chase family around smoking as she was not a smoker herself, but she doubted they would be cool with a stranger smoking away at the counter and ashing the cigarette without a tray, instead just using the . If there was a plainer example of Chloe absolute contempt for the Chase's, Max had not seen it yet. If what Victoria had admitted too was true, and she had no reason to doubt it, then Chloe was very much still the sensitive girl who set a classmate on fire for calling her poor.

As Max stepped into the kitchen, Chloe snapped her head back towards Max and shot her a toothy grin which stopped Max's heart for a moment. Unlike the other girls she was wearing the same clothing as she wore the day before. She apparently had slept in them.

"Hey Hippie, what's shaking?" Chloe asked her as she pushed her cigarette to her lips.

At a loss of words as she watched Chloe inhale, Max shrugged and stepped forward towards the punk girl sitting in the cloud of smoke. She took notice to the three cigarette butts pressed into the counter top. She winced because she knew Victoria was going to have a fit. It was probably what Chloe was going to be continuing to go for just as Rachel had anticipated.

"Why are you listening to Courtney Love…" Max had to ask as she joined Chloe, but held a respectable distance between the two of them "… or rather, why are you listening to her solo work?"

Any distance she thought could keep her safe was shattered. Cigarette between her lips, Chloe launched herself off her seat and pulled Max into a very smoky hug. Max squirmed and emitted a small laugh as she relaxed once again in Chloe's arms. She was just happy to have her in this good mood.

"What can I say?" Chloe replied over Max's shoulder. "I have an affinity for troubled girls who go through fucking awful shit and are unfairly shit on at every opportunity, with people actively and eagerly waiting for her to fail."

Max rolled her eyes and pulled back slightly to look at Chloe. There was an expression which she hadn't ever seen before from her. It was like she was stressed and in a state was vulnerability. It was honestly hard to imagine her like this, let alone see it unfold before her.

"Nobody wants you to fail," Max reassured Chloe, giving her a small shove on her shoulder. "I'm surprised to find you awake this early. You weren't much of a morning person when we were growing up I see no reason you'd be any different."

It was Chloe's turn to push back. She did, and it lacked any pretension of mercy

"Rude…” Chloe tsked her as she let Max out of her grasp, but annoying ran her knuckles over her head. "Nah, you're right. It's just… being in this house is so fucking weird… I mean, if you can even call all of this a home. It really explains Icky Vicky completely I suppose."

As Chloe dismissively gestured to her surroundings, Max decided to intervene before Chloe could criticize even deeper.
"Yeah, it's a lot to get used to that's for sure," Max admitted sheepishly as she looked around. "I've been coming over for a month and even with Victoria's parents Okaying me to be here whenever I like I still feel out of place."

"You can run away from Arcadia Bay, but you can't run away from the Arcadia Bay," Chloe said idly, as she dug for another cigarette. She paused as soon as she noticed Max was staring and added. "...You don't mind the smoke, right?"

Max shook her head. Maybe once she was bothered by it...

"No," she said as Chloe placed her new cigarette between her lips. "I wish you wouldn't, though... Victoria smokes too, and I wish she'd drop it too."

That did it. If there was one way to stop Chloe from doing something, it was to say Victoria did it as well. With a grump huff, Chloe slipped the cigarette behind her ear and play glared at Max. Max smiled back to Chloe; she was very aware that she had discovered a new tool to help her out.

"Thanks Max, if there's any motivation to quit, you just provided me with one..." Chloe muttered as she turned away, her hand rubbing her eyes.

"So... what's the deal with Maxine, anyway?" Chloe suddenly asked out loud, her eyes squinted as she stared at Max curiously. "I remember you hated it, how the fuck does Vicky get your blessing?"

Max fought the urge to blush or squirm or more likely both at the same time. The last thing she wanted was to encourage Chloe to dismiss it right on the spot as more squicky Max and Victoria which she clearly despised. She needed to know the truth.

"I did, and I do... it's just..." Max trailed off, a little flustered and definitely embarrassed by the call out. After a moment of silence, she looked up to the curious Chloe and added. "It's just... different when Victoria calls me 'Maxine'. It was getting to a point where everyone was using Maxine when I was in trouble or being annoying or making fun of it like someone I know used to. Victoria doesn't dismiss the name like others did. She treats it like... like it's regal or like I'm worth respect of the second syllable..."

Chloe was looking at her funny again. Her eyes were narrowed as she seemed to be quietly deliberating what Max had told her. She looked very annoyed that Victoria had been granted what seemed to be an exclusive privilege which Chloe didn't have access to. She also appeared a little guilt in the teasing she took part in. It was nothing to worry about, but Chloe didn't let things slide.

"Fuck... I didn't realize I gave you such a fucking complex," Chloe muttered as she averted her eyes to her feet. "If I knew it led you down this path to Victoria, I'd go back in time and punch myself in the throat."

Chloe clamped her mouth shut for a moment before she held her hand up to keep Max from saying something.

"Sorry..." Chloe amended quickly, sounding genuine in her regret. "I promised to be nice. It's just... I just worry, you know?"

Taking mercy on Chloe, Max nodded sympathetically. All of this couldn't have been easy on her. Victoria and Chloe's history dictated nothing but mutual hatred. So for the two of them to suddenly have this human connection... it must have been difficult.

"I know that, and I know your history with Victoria," Max replied graciously, her fingers pressed
against Chloe's forearm. "Victoria told me, then Rachel filled me in, or rather, Rachel filled me in with her version of events… or what she wanted to reveal. You can make fun of me for Victoria all you like, but I'm not the one dating an enigma…"

"Rachel is…" Chloe started before she paused and actually had to think her answer over carefully. "Rachel is hard to figure out, even now for me. But we do understand each other. You will too soon enough. You know… I think you're on track to becoming Rachel's second actual friend?"

Max rubbed her neck as she thought about her encounter with Rachel this morning.

"I don't know… I might have heard her talking intensely to her friend Sera on the way down here… I might have got caught…" she admitted to Chloe, but at Chloe's smirk, she added. "Well… okay, I was caught."

Max wasn't entirely certain why she had admitted to that so freely. Perhaps she felt it was just better to say it now and keep Rachel from lording it over her. The last thing she needed was an added embarrassment to keep her pinned down. Whatever her reasoning was, it was enough to earn a rip-roaring laugh from Chloe, which had made her personal embarrassment worth it.

"Snoop as always, I see. Classic Max Caulfield… you and Rachel have another thing in common," Chloe finally spoke lightly, rubbing her neck as her laughter faded but the grin she warm remained wide and warm. "By the way, Sera is an absolute sweetheart, but I suppose you'll get to know her sooner or later."

"Sooner or later?" Max repeated, curious of her meaning.

The slight hesitation on Max's part was clearly startling for Chloe; but still remained as confident as always in the face of sudden uncertainty.

"Well yeah, you realize that Rachel and I are like Pandora's Box times the highest number, right?" Chloe pointed out plainly, her lips curling slightly to reveal her sharkish grin at her. "You're stuck with us now, and you have no more excuses anymore. I mean it's a nine hour drive. If we can't pick you up, then we'll pay for a ticket to meet us…. Or you could get your rich prissy girlfriend to pony up. Least then you'll get to see her…"

"Chloe, I know better than to try and change your mind about something. I bet that's gotten truer these days, but I need you to know that I really like Victoria, and she's not nearly as bad as you think she is," Max said as she looked up at Chloe with wide eyes. "She's passionate and fierce, stubborn and proud; but she feels she's in competition with the whole entire world. Even against her own parents; and it's eating away at her. I want to help her, and I need your help."

"Yeah, stop calling her a bitch, got the memo…" Chloe muttered dismissively as she turned her eyes away from Max's gaze.

Max shook her head and forced her way back into Chloe's line of sight.

"No, it's so more than that," she returned with a quiet determination for Chloe to finally understand. "I want you to trust me. You have no reason to, after everything that happened between us, I know I am asking so much from you; but Victoria is my friend, and I'm asking you to at least try. Even if what I'm trying to do fails; even if I end up getting hurt by her. Please, Chloe… give me this one thing and save your 'I told you so'."

Max's silence left an uncomfortable void between Chloe and her. Chloe stood there stunned, her mouth unhinged as she searched Max for any sort of wiggle room. She would not find it. She
would not play the games Victoria and Chloe were engaged in. She might not have been certain of what Rachel's intentions were, but at least they were not the mind games Victoria and Chloe's had the potential to be.

Quietly, Max turned away to grab a glass for her water. As she reached the refrigerator, she heard the faint sound of Chloe clearing her throat.

"Look at us…" Chloe called out from behind her. "Weren't we supposed to be onto our second boyfriends by now?"

The words sounded familiar, haunting to here. Like something she hadn't thought about years but not only was it ensnared in her thoughts, it felt like it was spoken only a day before. Max turned around to find Chloe standing there. She was smiling and in her hand was a crumpled, yellowing piece of paper with familiar scribbling scrolled on it.

Her desire for a drink abandoned, Max instead stepped back to Chloe and snatched it out of Chloe's hand. Chloe was grinning too widely to resist the surprising act.

"Holy shit…" Max whispered as she scanned the list as though it had been buried treasure, which it was. "You still have this?"

Chloe nodded, a thin smile resting comfortably on her lips. She slowly nodded and allowed her hand to snake out and cover Max's hand.

"Everything to do with us stays with us forever," she reaffirmed confidently. "…Plus, we still have a jawbreaker we have to finish off. So you definitely have to come back now!"

Max looked up and stared at Chloe incredulously. It was clear to her that Chloe Price was not fucking around about this. Somewhere in the Price residence sat a five year old piece of candy waiting for them. It must have been a veritable biohazard by now. Yet Chloe wasn't concerned about it in the slightest.

As touched as Max was that Chloe had held onto their relics. that was, perhaps, one she would not have minded to throw away.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and your kind words. Sorry if is seems messier than usual.
Running on fumes, missing a deadline and problems right now
Staring silently at Victoria Chase sitting across from her, Rachel quietly wondered how Victoria was handling all of this.

She had some sense at what was going on, but Victoria was capable of being unreadable even to her when she wasn't acting like a spiteful idiot. This was one of those flashes of maturity which made Rachel slightly concerned about dealing with Victoria. She couldn't just wade into her business when it came to Max Caulfield. Victoria treated Max like she was the idol from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and Victoria was the fucking boulder.

… Which kind of made Chloe Indiana Jones...

Speaking of which, Chloe had dragged Max off to the kitchen with the idea of bringing a little Arcadia Bay to Mercer Island. By the smell of it, they were burning down the kitchen, which meant Chloe was busting out her hella shitty cooking skills. It was another motivation and reminder to Rachel that she would be working on Joyce and Chloe next. Rachel couldn't cook for shit and one of them had to be semi-competent in the kitchen. Hell, they could take a cooking class or two together if worse came to worse.

Rachel gave Victoria her most dazzling of smiles as she turned back to face Victoria, who looked like she was sucking back half a dozen warhead sour candies and was refusing to acknowledge her agony. For the most part, Victoria had been doing pretty well. The only notable exception was Chloe getting dropped while Max and her were in Max's room which, she had to admit, was hilarious. She didn't think Victoria had the fortitude to do that, but she did. She had to respect that.

Clearing her throat, she glanced at the laughter coming from the kitchen before she turned to see Victoria was staring at her, like she was expecting something from Rachel. She supposed she was right to be expecting Rachel to speak up.

"So, have you made any plans with Max today?" Rachel asked Victoria, her tone bright and benign. She did not want to leave Victoria under the impression that Rachel was in anyway her enemy, or standing in the way of Max and her.

But, as it turned out, Victoria's greatest skill was finding a reason to be annoyed; a reason to fight, no matter how inane Rachel's question had been.

"Why?" Victoria snapped back, "Should I run them by Price and you before I commit to anything? Will you chaperone us? I wouldn't want precious Chloe to be worried."

Rachel widened her eyes. Victoria and Chloe must have taken their squabbling to a whole other level the other night. Honestly, Rachel felt she was correct in her discomfort. A day into the reunion and Max and Chloe were thick as thieves and not only that, Chloe was becoming some sort of new gatekeeping father figure, defending Max from the Victoria interloper when in reality, Victoria knew a 16 year old Max Caulfield far better than Chloe did who used her nostalgia as a crutch.

At least… that was what she hoped was going on. The idea that Chloe was already crushing hard
on Max… No. She would not indulge in this. Not when Max and her were getting along this famously. Max was a great girl, and she wouldn't play. This was just an awkward transitional period. It wasn't Chloe's fault that the last mental image of Max she had was a stick figure, and now she was… well… hot.

Having spent two hours chilling with Max, it became pretty fucking obvious why Victoria and Chloe… no, just Victoria, was drooling all over her. She had this hipster charm to her that she could not control. Sort of a raw unexplored sensuality which Rachel doubted Max fully understood. If she had, she would be far more open to using Maxine.

Still, in spite of her under-utilization of her sexuality, it was kind of sweet that Victoria got a special name to use so soon. It was too bad Victoria was in this much of a bitch mode for Rachel to full appreciate it. There was a real innocent quality to the two of them. She might have even been a little envious. Neither of them had been poisoned by overwhelming loss. They got to be a couple of kid0 carefree and in love.

"No…" Rachel tried to reassure the suspicious Victoria. "We're new in Seattle… I just thought we'd get to take in the sights… who better than to show us a good time then a couple of locals?"

Victoria didn't even attempt to respond to Rachel's tourist moment. She turned away, clicking her tongue as she rolled her eyes. She looked like she wanted to say something awful, but she held back. It was probably because of that sweet small girl making Chloe laugh in the kitchen.

So Rachel remained silent and directed all of her attention away from Chloe, Max and the silently fuming Victoria, and instead to the future and just what that future looked like beyond the next month. Obviously things could not go back to how it was; but how was it all going to work. Chloe was talking about driving to Seattle every Friday to steal her away; but that would be fucking murder driving four times to Seattle over three days. She preferred the Greyhound option herself.

While there was a perfectly reasonable way to get Max to the Bay whenever her heart so desired, a new idea had popped into her mind. Technically it was an old idea, but whatever.

It came back to her as she watched Max's attention grow rapt as they discussed Blackwell. If Max was enamoured still by the school, then what was exactly stopping them from getting her enrolled? Money was no object. Tuition wasn't cheap; Rachel had more than enough to get Max through school. Influence was a little trickier, but worse come to worse, then why couldn't her Dad go back up to plate for Max?

Rachel paused her thoughts as she looked across the table to Victoria, and it did not take long for her to realize that she had an in far more effective than Dad. She had a wealthy Chase girl lusting after Max, and the Chase girl had parents with influence to exert over Blackwell. All it would take really was collaboration with Victoria.

Emitting a small frown, Rachel looked away. Would Victoria even want her to go to school with her? If Max was at Blackwell, then so long separation between Victoria and Queen Bee Victoria; the barriers Victoria set would be for nothing and instead her social circle would be caught up in it. Max would get exposed to people like Courtney and Nathan. When the day arrived and Max stood in front of her, would Victoria acknowledge her feelings. Or would she play it safe and reject Max for the stableness that was her position in the Vortex Club.

These were so many hypotheticals… and there were so many unknowns at play. All that she knew for certain was Victoria's two worlds needed to be merged. She mostly needed to do this for her sake, and for Max... and maybe even for Chloe as well. Chloe needed to see that there was a human underneath the bitch.
Secrets never fucking did anyone any good... and if Max did end up at school and Victoria rejected her... well, once she finished knocking Victoria the fuck out, she would have to find a new girlfriend for Max... Dana, perhaps, well, if she swung that way for real. She would be new as well. Steph Gingrich felt like a hard mode and small Max demanded a tall girl.

"Surprise! We brought crêpes merdiques! I used Google translate... don't judge me..." Rachel heard Chloe call out to Victoria and her. She looked up and found Chloe and Max standing there, both of them appearing immensely proud as they carried two plates of managed up and nearly burnt pancakes in their hands. It looked as though they had physically picked out the more obvious burn points in the food.

Across from Rachel, Victoria tilted her head at Chloe's mangled attempt at French. Instead of calling Chloe out as was probably the first thing that came to mind, Victoria instead exhaled and directed her attention to Max, who was smiling shyly at Victoria's sudden focus.

"Ah...Pancakes..." Max elaborated sheepishly as her eyes darted between Victoria and Rachel's. "Pancake-hash browns, really... couldn't get the stupid things off the pan in one piece."

Rachel and Victoria shared a look. It seemed as though both of them knew exactly what went wrong, but neither of them were keen on pointing out the obvious. Rachel smirked and looked back as she decided to do Victoria this one small favour. She'd probably say something bitchy and make Max cry. Today she would be the villain.

"I don't know shit about cooking... but you know... you could have greased the skillet, right?" Rachel voiced Victoria and hers common sense solution to the sticking problem.

Chloe and Max blinked as they both absorbed the casual reminder that the pair of them together was dumb as hell in an adorable away. From the small groan Chloe emitted, she was thoroughly embarrassed by their obvious error.

As Rachel looked at the plate Chloe unceremoniously dropped in front of her, she looked back up to Chloe who grinned and pecked her cheek before she slumped down into the seat next to her. Rachel smiled back, allowing her hand to reach under the table top to gently squeeze her Chloe's thigh.

She tried not to notice the stink-eye Chloe shot Victoria's way as Max sat down lightly next to Victoria. It was gone as soon as Max looked to Chloe once again. In its place was a confident smile.

"Never mind Rachel being bitchy about it wonderful attempt. This is so lovely," Victoria spoke as she looked to Max faintly, choosing to ignore the narrowing of Rachel's eyes. "Random af question, Maxine, but did you make these yourself? Like the whole process was untaken by you? Price was only the sous chef... or dishwasher?"

As Max blushed and Victoria earning a hella amount of brownie points from her, Chloe huffed and crossed her arms on the table. She leaned forward and leered frightfully at Victoria, who was still smiling amicably. It was like she hadn't just down low thrown shade on her.

"What?" Chloe spoke with a controlled anger flaring through her words. "Are you I spat in it?

"No, I'm afraid something a little more prescription oriented will fall into it," Victoria spoke, her words dripping with poisonous resentment. "Although getting Herpes is a close runner up... no offense Rachel, I'm sure she takes precautions with you..."
As Chloe looked ready to remind Victoria why she got her ass dosed by them in the first place, Rachel batted Chloe's leg with her foot, making Chloe nearly yelp out as she turned her hard gaze to Rachel. Rachel merely smiled and picked through the edible portions of her pancakes. The last thing Max needed right now was more fucking drama. She would soon enough understand what Victoria was. Chloe did not need to be the one to open Max's eyes.

As for the Herpes comment… well that was just low quality bait she was not going to get tricked by; using her Victoria Chase Scale of Awfulness that was maybe 2 out of 10 on the insult scale.

"You know, I think it's a beautiful day to lounge a bit," Rachel spoke up, choking on her annoyance. "Chloe and I need to detox anyways. We've been drunk in some way or another since we left the Bay…"

Max smiled and nodded, but like Rachel she too glanced at Victoria and Chloe whose moods had shifted into something far more foul tempered by them being even in close proximity. It was strange… Chloe was starting to reach a state of neutrality back in Blackwell. All that hope was gone now. Rachel exhaled and rubbed her forehead.

"Okay, so we're back to sullen silences. I guess the adults will talk," Rachel sighed out. She directed her attention squarely to Max and added. 'I was thinking we could go out for a shoot whenever you're ready.

As Rachel's attention focus turned completely onto Max, the poor girl went beet red at the sudden scrutiny she received. Max was too cute for her own good as she attempted and failed several times to get the ball rolling between Rachel and her as Chloe and Victoria looked on. Both of them clearly lost at that Max and she had been already making plans without them involved.

"Yes, absolutely we can," Max said finally, her head nodding. "How about this coming Friday, we go out for a session? That way we can talk shop first, and Victoria you can as well, and Chloe you can join as well. It's about time I get you to be a photographer too…"

Chloe snorted, amused at the prospect but she was not entirely against the offer Max had made. As for Victoria, she rolled her eyes at the idea.

"Oh yeah, spending time with Chloe sounds like a genuine blast," Victoria said sardonically.

Glancing at Victoria for a moment, Rachel turned back to Max and shook her head. No, she was not about to let Chloe and Victoria ruin this for them. Not when getting to know each other was so important for their future. Adding the volatile mixture of Chloe and Victoria was better done when they had some time together without the added pressure those two would inevitably bring through their grudges and inevitable attention seeking.

She loved Chloe, but she just knew her too well not to expect anything less than Chloe playing a role in turning it into a shit show. No matter what Chloe could promise either Max or her, one comment from Victoria and it would all be off. This also went for Victoria as well, but potentially could end up way worse. Chloe didn't possess the ability to really hurt someone with words as Victoria could.

"No… maybe another time, but for now I think this is something for us," Rachel said, ignoring the Chloe and Victoria's expressions of shock at what she said. "I actually think Victoria and Chloe should spend some time together, and if Chloe knows what's good for her, she's not about to argue…"

Rachel looked at Chloe, who was defeated before a fight could even be started. She knew better
than to challenge Rachel on this. Rarely was Rachel ever this serious about things. She preferred her Chloe wild and free and doing whatever the fuck she wanted; but this was different. This was something she and Max had to do without outside pressure to bend to their complaints.

With Chloe and her on the same wavelengths, Rachel turned back and smiled at Max. Max looked stunned as she turned away to look to Victoria, whose hands were in tight fists and resting on the table. Rachel would make this up to her as well in some way… possibly by poaching Max for Blackwell.

"Yes…" Max agreed, her words finding more and more confidence. "I think Victoria wouldn't mind hanging out with Chloe, either…"

Rachel emitted a laugh and reached over to high five Max as both Victoria and Chloe were left speechless at them. With Max as a partner, Rachel was happy to see the two of them united in a common emotion - namely outrage - as the two girls had realized just how whipped they were by the pair of them.

Like it or not, but it seemed as though short girls always conquered tall girls, after all…

As she expected, it did not take long for Price and Rachel to leech into her life unapologetically. Rachel was spread out on a chaise lounge in a bikini, catching sun rays with her eyes hidden behind heavy sunglasses. She seemed despondent, like she was tuning the world out. Although she hadn't mentioned it to anyone, Victoria could see how exhausted Rachel was yesterday. It seemed as though she was not lying when she said they spent much of the summer intoxicated. Privately she wondered if drugs were involved. She supposed that she would not be surprised if they were.

As for Price, she was rejuvenated by her reunion. At the moment, both she and Max had jumped into the pool and were splashing around like they with ten years old again. Stupid and childish, but Victoria could see that the two of them were making up for lost time. Perhaps one day they would act a little older.

As for her, she was at the patio table, occasionally looking at the interactions in the pool and back at her phone, where she had just told Taylor that she was forgoing her France sojourn. She really did not want to talk about it with Taylor, but from the texts Taylor was sending her, her mother had taking a turn for the worse over the summer and she was really upset from it. She felt she had to help in some way, even if it meant letting her closest friend pry into her personal life, even if it meant potentially risking a revelation of Maxine.

Taylor, Victoria believed, was probably the only person at Blackwell she felt comfortable enough to talk about this Maxine development. She had always been good and comfortable enough in her skin not to denigrate Victoria when she felt she needed to be vulnerable for her own social climbing. She wasn't a poor girl like Courtney who was seeking her approval at every turn. Taylor was fully independent and chose to be a friend without strings attached.

**Sweet-T** - *wtf u mean you're not going to France V?*

Victoria glanced at the text, her eyebrow arched at the reaction her friend had to the text she sent her way. She supposed it should have been expected considering just how fucking much time she
spent bragging about it to anyone who'd listen to her.

A splash and a yelp caught her attention. She looked to the pool and watched with narrowed eyes as Chloe's disgusting man hands wrapped around Maxine and dunked her underwater. It was not at all a fair fight. She was tempted to jump in and help Maxine, but that meant touching Chloe Price. No fucking thanks.

As Max came back up, she ran her arm over her eyes and caught Victoria looking at her. She smiled that toothy, ridiculously cute smile, making Victoria's heart flutter. Victoria quirked her lips upwards and turned her focus back to the unanswered text from Taylor.

You - Something came up.

You - Whatever.

Sweet-T - You spent months getting ready,

Sweet-T - and ur just not going

Sweet-T - What happened?

You - Nothing happened

You - I'm just not fucking interested in it

You - I'd be spending it with my parents

You - Not doing cool shit.

You - fuck that might as well stay home

You - brb

Victoria set her phone down as she looked up to see mother and father walking together and speaking seriously to Madison Xu. The presence of the adults was enough to end the play fighting in the pool, but not enough to get Rachel's attention. Go figure.

Madison Xu was an artist type. She was an actress, a painter, a surrealist, a contortionist, and even a rumoured dark arts practitioner. Father had picked up at a neo-surrealist show in Kyoto a few years back and quickly ascended to Father's right hand. Victoria wondered why Mother wasn't threatened, but after meeting Maxine, she was starting to understand a lot more now.

Not with Chloe though, that was a whole separate story.

As for Madison Xu, Victoria and she had a decent relationship. Nothing friendly, but nothing confrontational either. They mostly kept out of each other's business, even if Victoria thought Madison was getting a little old to dress up like an edge lord haute couture queen. At least today she looked somewhat mature in a Black dress and grey open cardigan. One would think she would be boiling in this sort of hot weather, but Xu defied common logic.

Oh Jesus... she was a Chinese Rachel Amber… Fuck.

"Look at all these young ladies lounging poolside, Sienna," Father joked as they approached Victoria. "Good thing we don't have neighbours. Might start asking questions-"
"Hello Mother, Father," Victoria spoke suddenly so that Dad didn't take it too far. She glanced to Madison and added. "Why is Madison here?"

Next to father, a faint smile crossed onto Madison's mouth as she stood there inspecting the Chase teenager like she was fucking nothing at all. Victoria's words stirred Rachel back to alertness and Victoria saw Amber turn her head to look at the interaction going down right in front of her.

"A pleasure to see you as well, Miss Chase," Xu greeted, unmoved by the blunt query Victoria had offered up.

"And she's here because we're going to have her stay with you while we're gone," mother spoke to Victoria, her tone offering no opportunity to argue with her as she stood there, hand on her hip as she stared down Victoria.

Well, mother should have known a whole lot better… she was going to argue it whether she liked it or not. She didn't need a fucking sitter; especially not someone fucking weird as Xu. Small doses she was fine with, but an entire month having to answer to her? Fuck that. Seriously, fuck that.

"Holy shit, overprotective much I'm fucking nearly eighteen!" Victoria all but screeched at her parents.

Mother and father shared a look and silently behind them, Max and Chloe climbed out of the pool and joined Rachel who was now standing up from her rest.

"Yeah you're right, love..." Father spoke next. "You'll be eighteen next year and a few weeks, and on that day I will believe you are responsible enough to handle that length of time. Until then you need a guardian."

As Victoria glared at her father, he turned away and looked at Max who had grabbed a towel and was wrapping around her wet shirt and underwear. He gave her a toothy grin, like he already considered her one of his own now. Probably the only fucking decent thing about Dad and Mom right now was their surprisingly genuine affection for Maxine.

"Hello Max, always a good thing to see you here..." Father greeted her before he turned to Rachel and snapped his fingers "...if I'm not mistaken, you must be the infamously perfect Rachel Amber..." he looked to Chloe and added again "... which would make you the even more infamous Chloe Price. Damien Chase, my wife Sienna. It's always a genuine pleasure to meet Victoria's friends... or enemies... the lines always seem to blur for her between the two."

As father offered his hand out to Amber and Price, naturally it was Price to speak first like the loud mouth she was. She grinned at Father and his words.

"It's really a bit of both," Price spoke brightly as she stepped back to join Rachel. "I never expected someone like you would create all of this. Stick to your guns, sir. Victoria needs good pair of hands to rear her right. Spoiler alert... she's a bit of a brat."

As Father laughed out of rapacious amusement and Victoria stepped forward, ready to push a bitch back into the pool Rachel wrapped an arm around her girl and narrowed her eyes at the Blonde.

After a moment, she directed her attention back to Mother and Father.

"You know, I got an idea that could remedy all of this," Rachel interjected as she pulled off her sunglasses to look properly at the Chase parents. "Chloe is 18 and I am 18. We could take care of lil Victoria... if you would like, of course..."

Victoria's rage vanished and replacing it was shock at the suggestion Rachel had made. She wasn't
alone. Mother, Father, Maxine, even Price looked stunned by the idea of the two of them being guardians for Victoria. If Rachel was joking, she hadn't reached the punch line yet. She stood there, looking deadly serious about the offer.

"You would do that?" Father was the first one to speak. He glanced to Mother and added. "Sienna…Madison was looking forward to her break…"

Mother nodded, not agreeing, but acknowledging what her husband said. Her attention never left Rachel's. She seemed entranced by the tattooed blonde standing there, her slender arm still clutching Price tightly.

"If you could, I would like to invite you both to my gallery showing," Madison piped up to Rachel. "It would help me greatly not to have a surface level photographer hanging off me."

Rachel blinked and looked to Madison with a smile.

"Thank you for the invite, and yeah we definitely would, wouldn't we Chloe?" Rachel happily agreed as she squeezed onto Chloe tighter. "I figure since one of these days I'm going to science a baby into Chloe; we might as well jump into the deep end and start with a terrible teenager!"

Chloe looked over to Rachel with an expression of shock and horrification at the thought of being turned into a mother. Rachel did not share a look with her, but that stupid smug look returned to her face. It happened whenever she fucking knew she had flustered her girlfriend.

"What the fuck Rachel… since when am I the one having the baby?" Chloe stage whispered in front of everyone. "I thought we were rock, paper scissoring it?"

The only one to laugh was Father. Mother rolled her eyes, Madison was beyond paying attention as she seemed focused on inspecting the bikini clad Rachel, and Maxine looked as though she fucking wanted to die. Rachel on the other hand was very pleased by the statement.

Jesus Christ, Price needed a fucking muzzle…

"I can't believe you fucking said that…" Victoria said on behalf of everyone, rubbing her face. Victoria cringed as Father, who was still chuckling, wrapped an arm around her.

"Never mind her disapproval, Chloe. You're both adults, with a bright relationship. It's only natural to think those things out; and in your case you're lucky to not have to worry about a condom breaking," Father spoke to Chloe, ignoring Victoria's struggle to flee from his grasp. "Tell you what, if Sienna here goes for it, we'll take you up on the offer."

The attention of the gathering of adults, teens and fake-adults turned to Mother, who stood there cross armed as she carefully examined Rachel and Chloe. She was clearly not blind to the tension between the three girls. Mother looked to her, and like Rachel and Price before her, she scrutinized her daughter as well.

"So long as Vanessa and Ryan Caulfield both are aware of this, Madison checks in on you and you call us every other night, then I suppose I would be fine with it…" Mother finally allowed after her careful examination was completed "… That is, if Victoria doesn't mind it…"

Rachel Amber smiled that stupid fucking grin at Victoria, who stood there silently seething at the prospect. As shit as this was, at least she knew Rachel and Chloe would fuck off out of her space. Madison was an unknown… so yeah… this fucking sucked regardless and she would never acknowledge this happened ever fucking again after September came around.
"Yes, Victoria," Rachel spoke up, twisting the fucking knife even deeper. "Would you object to Chloe and me babysitting you for the summer?"

Victoria did not look at the couple. She stared at her Maxine, who looked like she was actually thrilled by this. Reluctantly she nodded once.

"Alright then, it's settled… which reminds me. Since Victoria is staying, I thought we could have an early birthday dinner for Victoria," Mother spoke up happily. She turned to Max and added. "Max; Damien and I would like for you to pass along an invitation to your parents for the celebration. Nothing formal or anything, I feel it's time we all got to meet each other… Chloe, Rachel, you too are also invited, of course…"

"I'll certainly drag them along!" Maxine happily agreed for Mother.

As Mother smiled to Maxine and leaned down to give her swift kiss on her cheek, she turned away and Mother silently led Father and Madison back towards the home, leaving Victoria standing there, mortified as she realized that Price and Rachel were effectively going to be her new guardians for the next month…

As soon as the parents closed the French doors behind them, Price broke out into a wild laugh at the expense of the blonde she hated with all her heart. Next to her, Rachel rolled her eyes and pulled Chloe away from the shaking Victoria.

"Dude, holy shit! I didn't think Victoria could have rad as hell parents. I just assumed they'd be fucking assholes too!" Chloe muttered to Rachel as Rachel led her back to the pool. She turned back to Victoria and spat. "God, where the fuck did it all go so wrong with you?"

Chloe did not get an answer. Not as Rachel shoved her into the pool and dived in after her, leaving Maxine standing looking at the thoroughly humiliated Victoria. She stepped forward tentatively and took Victoria's hands into hers.

"Hey... don't let her get to you…” Maxine said quietly, her fingers toying with the palms of Victoria's hands.

Victoria exhaled sharply and fidgeted in place. She hated Chloe… but she hated the idea that Chloe was right about her even more…

"I'm not," Victoria lied right through her teeth. "...I can't stand her, Maxine. I'm really trying, but I… I'm going to fucking snap-"

Maxine silenced her with a swift kiss on her lips. She stood on her tippy toes and everything, just as Victoria liked. It was too fucking adorable for her own good.

"I know you are trying…” Max said as she pulled back and smiled for her. "Thank you so much for what you're doing for me. It means so much to me that you are… I do still think it'll get better soon. Chloe and you just need to understand each other better… I don't know if it'll fix it all, but it'll help."

Doubting Maxine's optimism about finding a solution to growing instability between Chloe and her because Chloe was obviously fucking crushing hard on Maxine, Victoria nodded and sighed. She pressed her lips against Maxine's forehead.

"I guess I shouldn't be mad…” Victoria spoke as she rested her head on the top of Maxine's head. "You know… having Rachel and Price as chaperones means we get a lot of freedom…”
The little playful shove Victoria received made her feel a little better.

Chapter End Notes

I was being a bit angsty the other week, so I'm sorry. I lost my doggo while I was finishing up the chapter. He was lying right next to me one moment, the next moment he's gone. As you can imagine I just didn't care for last chapter after that.

I recognize that this comes off as possible attention whoring; I don't like to draw personal things in, but I did a week ago so an explanation felt warranted.

Thanks as always for your continued patience. I decided I wanted to break the Sunday release pattern. Trying to get back down to three to four days but work has picked up. I work less in the winter so you got quick updates back then.

Anyways, thanks as always for your patience and kind words.

Onwards to better days.
Watching out the window as a blue hair girl casually attempted to break into his garage, while a blonde stood behind her, her arms crossed while she looked from her girlfriend and back up to him; staring right into his eyes as though she too was amused by the clandestine nature of Chloe Price. Ryan Caulfield shook his head at Rachel Amber almost as though this was something to be expected from her.

It had been three days since Chloe Price and Rachel Amber shown up on his doorstep and brought another piece of Arcadia Bay to Seattle. Time had a way of erasing memories of those he knew. Chloe was no longer the string bean girl with her toothy smile, her father's strawberry blonde hair and her Mother's quick wit, the same girl who'd Vanessa and him would have to patch up after her escapees with Max, whom she tried to be a bodyguard too.

Those days were gone now, and instead Chloe was a shadow of who she was. Age had a way of dimming the brightness of youth, but for Chloe it seemed as though she lost hers extremely fast. She was much quicker to anger, and the anger wasn't the frustration of youth. It was potent, like she had seen far too much, far too soon... and not just because of what happened to William.

The fact that she was gay was strange thing to find out, but when it came to finding someone, Ryan had to wonder which girl would be straight if they found themselves at the center of Rachel Amber's attentions. Chloe told the story to Vanessa and him, and he himself had seen this Rachel in action. Rachel had this seductive undertone that seemed to magnetize people around her, like they were in her orbit.

Well… from what he had seen, an exception came from Victoria. It spoke volumes to the character of Max's girlfriend… friend… photography partner… whatever it was they were that made Victoria spout inane, vaguely sexual things to Vanessa about Max.

Privately Ryan wondered if Rachel was the cause to Chloe's anger. Not the cause, but something about her told him that Rachel was a next level troublemaker. It was in her eyes. Like she was always attempting to anticipate the other person and then proceed to position herself into a place where she got a maximum reaction or reward. It was a risky thing to do. One misstep and it would tumble onto her. It probably did more than once during their time together. Chloe probably ended having to doing a lot of damage control.

If someone was listening to his thought, one might have reasonably assumed that he thought Rachel was bad. He didn't, in fact he found her to be quite charming and she provided a level of honesty which surprised him. If Chloe tried to evade something, Rachel dug in and forced it out of her and Chloe had seemingly no defense against Rachel when Rachel directed her total attention to her. From what he gathered, their journey to the Caulfield home was entirely orchestrated by Rachel who had poked, prodded and harassed her girlfriend to take this step towards reconciliation with Max, and for that Ryan would be grateful to Rachel for what was years of effort put in.

After all, Max wasn't the one who hurt Chloe.

It was him and his pride.
As Ryan stepped out of the house, he erased his self-directed anger and put a smile on his face as he approached the girls. Rachel smiling dazzlingly at him and Chloe still preoccupied with trying to lift the locked garage door. It took Rachel love ass-booting Chloe to direct her attention to Ryan. She stood up and sheepishly rubbed the back of her neck.

"Hey Ryan," Chloe greeted him, her hand dropping to her side once again. "So basically I am trying to break into your house."

Squinting at Chloe and her honesty, Ryan pulled his phone from her pant pocket and causally tapped the garage door app. He could not help but smirk at Chloe as she herself looked exacerbated by it and turned away from him to walk inside without any more words, leaving Rachel and him behind.

"You know you could have just come on in and tell me you need into the garage, Doughy Chloe."

Earning a glare from Chloe and a small frustrated shove, Chloe opened the door and climbed into the truck.

"I wouldn't want to disturb you," Chloe spoke sardonically to Ryan with a roll of her eyes. "It's not like we can take it back with us. Victoria's still too embarrassed to be seen with it on her property. Like someone would notice it from her gilded castle…"

Ryan nodded; yes he thought it was a little odd that Victoria allowed a rare display of elitism in his presence the other day. It wasn't usually something she did, and if she did it was teasing. That had been deliberately malicious, and meant to humiliate Chloe. It did its job too; Victoria knew exactly where to hit. He knew that Victoria and Chloe weren't getting along, but Victoria had been just plain mean about it to hit from a financial and social angle.

Now, as much as he hated to be on the fence, he had to be when he objectively observed that Chloe had been sniping away at Victoria confidence and image from the safety of being almost a Caulfield for the hours, knowing Victoria was not in a position to fire back. Her attacks were much more personally charged and chipped away right down to Victoria's confidence. As awful as Victoria reacted, Chloe's unchallenged and unilateral belittlement of Victoria was not any better.

"Yes, Victoria is a very particular girl. Max came home with an invite for this weekend, so I guess I'll see for myself," he said as he leaned against his tool case. "I was hoping that Max would be able to remove that stick from her ass, but if anything its gotten worse… they both probably think we haven't noticed them."

That caught both Chloe and Rachel's attention. Chloe looked a little gobsmacked by the revelation, but Rachel was far less surprised, and Ryan wasn't surprised by that. Rachel remained propped against the truck as she causally lit a cigarette, not at all caring to ask for permission as she did so. Ryan wasn't about to raise a fuss. He did not want to meet the unspoken challenge which she offered. It was like she was testing his defenses, probing him to figure out where he would fight back from.

She would find that Ryan was not a fighting sort… well, at least about the things that were not important to him.

"Strange thing, I know I should be... I don't know the right word... understanding, or something," he said, fumbling over his words as the two girls stared at him. "I'm not against it, or Rachel and you… it's just…"

Chloe held up her hand, a small grin crossing over her mouth.
"You're fine with her swinging that way, but you're curious to wonder why someone sweet like Max is hanging out with fucking Victoria Chase?" Chloe stepped in for him. "Yeah, you're not the only one."

Ryan remained silent as the girls seemed to want him to weigh in on the Victoria Chase question. Chloe wanted him to stand by her in her mistrust for an apparent high school rival who was sniffing around her childhood best friend. Rachel, of course, was much harder to read. Still, he felt as though she would not be unbothered by him standing up and telling Chloe that Victoria had been nothing short of a sweetheart – a little awkward about it, but still – to the Caulfield family.

But as the Victoria question was the focal point to their conversation, Ryan felt something deeper gnawing away at him as he looked into the face of a girl he left in Arcadia Bay a sobbing, grieving mess without so much as a second thought until months down the line. She was smiling now, but there was something in her eyes. It was a deep rooted accusation of what he had done to her all those years ago in taking away the stability in good friend when she needed her the most.

Standing there, staring at Chloe and already uncomfortable with the cigarette which Rachel was sucking back; Ryan tapped his phone and closed the door. Just in case. There were things to be said, and he doubted he wanted it to be heard by his nosy neighbours.

As the door closed, he exhaled and allowed his guilt a voice for once.

"I'm glad that you are here Chloe… in both a larger sense and here right now," Ryan spoke to Chloe, whose back was turned, but Rachel remained a constant audience. "There's been a lot I wanted to talk to you about…"

Chloe turned back to face Ryan properly. The gin on her face vanished a little at the sight of his stony seriousness.

"There's no right way to start it. So I will begin with the topic point of your Dad," Ryan spoke uncomfortably. "If you want to tell me no, feel free to tell me to stop…"

He trailed off as Chloe more or less launched herself out of the truck and stood there, her eyes focusing sharply onto his. It was like she wasn't sure just what to make of what he was attempting to do. She glanced to Rachel, who took another drag of her cigarette.

"I should leave…" Rachel murmured out loud.

While Ryan was grateful for her tact, it did not last long. Not as Chloe reached out and grabbed her girlfriend's hand.

"No I-I'm just a little startled. Stick around, Rachel," she requested from Rachel.

Chloe and Rachel held their eyes on each other. It was Chloe's silent plea for her to remain at her side. So that she did not have to have this conversation without someone to lean on. Ryan could only imagine that even a mention of William was still so raw in the girl. He did not blame her.

"Chloe, I don't think that either you or Max were fully aware of just how much Vanessa and I were struggling to make ends meet in Arcadia Bay…" Ryan stated the overarching theme to all of his guilt.

Chloe arched her eyebrows. She did not seem to know just what to make of this, or where it was going. It needed elaboration. Elaboration and self-incrimination, which would undoubtedly play a role in breaking the fragile bond the two of them had. It was all in the vague hope that honesty would make things better.
"We had the education, but nowhere to apply to. So Vanessa and I worked menial jobs and started
to save up for an eventual strike out towards Seattle," he went on having captured Chloe's attention.
"Vanessa and I's greatest sin was that we did not sit Max down years before to explain that we
would have to move. Neither of us wanted to destroy the friendship we were watching blossoming
with an inevitable sense that it would all just end one day. Ignorance was bliss, and not just for the
two of you… not thinking about how it would affect the two of you… it made what we were
planning so much easier to carry out."

He expected an immediate outrage. Instead Chloe just stood there in silence. Whatever she was
feeling now… She had no intentions on sharing it.

"But Joyce and William… they are personal saints to the Caulfield family, Chloe," Ryan pressed
on, his voice unconsciously softened at the thought of his old friends. "In the earlier days of your
friendship, your sleepovers and all that time you spent at your home, all the trips and outings with
William and Joyce. It was their way of helping to relieve the financial pressures Vanessa and I had.
It helped us save money on food and whatever expenses that came up; all of it could be saved for
the move."

Exhaling, Ryan shook his head. He had spent years thinking this through. It was hard to believe
that he was having this conversation at long last.

"I always… God… I always felt like shit…" he admitted to the two girls. Exhaling, he looked back
up to them and added. "You see, there's this fucking male pride Dad bullshit that takes over when
you're down on your luck. It makes you tell people that things are great when they aren't and the
idea of charity or even kindness offensive. Sort of like you fail being a parent, failed at being a
man…"

Chloe reached out and squeezed onto Ryan's arm. It was meant to be a comfort, like she could take
away the pain he felt. If anything it made it that much worse. He knew where this story ended, and
he knew just how she was going to take it.

"But William… your Dad…" he said in spite of his growing guilt. "William just said: 'You do what
you have to do for your family. There's no shame in a getting a helping hand. No apologies.' Every
time… every single time I got prideful, he'd just say it and shut me down completely."

In spite of everything, Ryan still cracked a small smile for the girls; Chloe in particular. He could
not look at Rachel. She just stood there cold as ice, with an empty unfeeling expression. It was like
all of this was old news, something which she had dealt with before.

"I paid him back wherever I could. I mostly got him drunk. Something I think he needed," he
informed Chloe. "You two were a handful; and as great as he was, even you have to admit now that
babysitting Max and Chloe was a daunting task."

Chloe busted out a laugh, Rachel did too, but she was very much in control. The laughter did not
meet her eyes. She still stood there, silently judging him.

"You see in so doing all of this, I guess he saw Max as one of his own, someone he considered
family," he hypothesized to William's daughter. "In spite of this feeling, he swallowed it and still he
sat me down and told me that I had to put my family first and foremost. Max and you could hate
me taking her away, but happiness and contentment came second to the security for a family."

Ryan pulled away from Chloe and took a step back from her and Rachel. He tried to not pay
attention to the growing curiosity in Chloe and the dread in Rachel's eyes. She knew watch was
coming next, why Chloe hadn't… it was a mystery he did not know he should even attempt to try
"When William died… I wanted to throw away my offer, at least at first. I wanted to be there for you in the way that William was for Max until you were processing through the grief at least," Ryan continued on slowly as he watched all good nature fade away. "But… your Dad's words came back to me. If I did that, all the sacrifice both he and your mother made for my family to get this chance would be for nothing. Finding work in that environment was not something I could just turn down…"

Gone was the smile, Chloe had. She stood there in silence, batting away Rachel's hand as she reached out to take it.

"So we made a decision," Ryan continued on. "It was not an easy choice, but when Rachel and you calm down a bit and have a family; you will understand why I chose to leave, and why I would do it again in a heartbeat. I know it's not what you want to hear, but it is the only truth which I have for you. The only thing I regret, aside from leaving your mother to her grief is that to save my family, I had to hurt another. I had to hurt yours."

None of this sounded good outside of his head and spoken to Chloe. It wasn't comforting, it was him dodging and weaving around, making excuses for decisions he made so long ago. Mistakes he could never undo. He thought somehow that this could go smoothly, like Chloe would just brush it off like she had with Max; But Max wasn't to blame for the move. This was Vanessa and his arbitrary decision and Chloe was mature enough to recognize it.

"I guess that I held onto a hope for you, of which I had held onto when I was watching you and Max play Pirates and showing a bravery few children your age possess," he went on, aware that Chloe had gone into a brooding train of thought. "I hoped that you would not change, and it came true. I knew you would be a vibrant, strong young woman. Through all of this… you found your way-"

"You think I just fucking managed it on my own at fourteen? I was alone, Ryan. I was fucking alone!" she blurted out back at him. "My Mom had her own thing and she didn't give a flying fuck about what I was going through. The shrinks didn't help, fucking no one did. No, I only 'found my way' because of Rachel; we survived our shit because we had each other!"

There was a small nudge against Chloe, who glared at the source of it. Rachel was shooting her a warning look, like she had blurted something out that Rachel hadn't wanted the man to know. As Chloe snapped her head back to Ryan, he directed his focus to her as well.

"I just… If you would allow it, I would like to be there for you, in the way I failed before," Ryan extended to her finally. "I know you're an adult now, and you don't need some old bearded hipster telling you what to do. But I want to be someone in your life; I want to help you out wherever you need it."

Chloe rolled her eyes, like the idea was ridiculous; mostly because it had been. What need did she have of him? She had love and a support network built from scratch. There was nothing that he could do to ease her pain. That role was lost a long time ago.

Still he bit the bullet. He owed William nothing less than his full loyalty to Chloe… even if she was staring at him like he had suddenly become the bane of her existence.

"I'd be careful making that offer…" Chloe muttered to herself. "You just gave Rachel Carte fucking Blanche…"
Chloe heaved out hard and shook her head. Her expression of disbelief turned to rage.

"No… no, you know what, Fuck you Ryan!" she suddenly and violently snapped at the father. "You didn't come back and help, so why the fuck is that you think that you can fix anything now! No, instead my mom was left to wallow in her grief and marry the first fucking asshole she saw. Max has an excuse, alright, she's Max. She gets jumpy and she didn't have a choice in the matter. You... you could have been there. You could have called my Mom at any time. One measly fucking phone call from you and it would have done her wonders. What the fuck kind of excuse do you have?"

Chloe looked as though she was holding back her tears, but like her Mother, she was a proud woman and she wasn't going to offer an opening to anyone. Especially not to someone who had wronged her.

What answered could he even provide her exactly? As far as he saw it, there was nothing which he could say that remedied any of this. He had absolutely nothing that could ease her compounded mixture of rage, indignation and overwhelming grief for her father.

Perhaps… perhaps honesty was the only course now; even if it was a punch in the gut.

"None, because there is nothing I can say that fixes what happened," he informed the shaking tall girl. "When you get older, you'll find more and more how messy life is. You aren't going to get an answer you'll like. You won't even get a reason. It just happened, and I'm left here trying to make sense of the madness long after the pain was caused."

Rachel stepped forward, dropping her cigarette as she placed herself between Ryan and Chloe. She held her sharp hazel eyes on Ryan for a moment, killing his urge to press on before she turned to Chloe, who looked ready to go nuts on him, and perhaps rightfully so too. The truth he gave her was not exactly something he was proud of either.

Grabbing onto Chloe's wrist, Rachel stood there in silence as she tilted her head up to look at the girl properly. She spoke no words; instead she remained a focus for Chloe to come down from her overwhelming anger. Slowly, she echoed five words that brought Chloe to a standstill.

"Chloe, what would your Dad want?"

It was a question which Chloe and him both knew the answer to. They both admired William for his diplomacy and his compassion. They both knew that fighting each other over this was the last thing William wanted. William wanted nothing but love for Chloe and without him here… Chloe just… seemed she needed it more than ever.

Ryan not only owed it to the dead, he genuinely wanted to be this. Nothing could make up for the past, of course. But the future between them didn't have to be tense and filled with a constant underlining anger. Chloe didn't need the added pain this brought. Not when she already carried such a burden already.

God, he hoped this renewed hurt in Chloe was worth it…

Across from him, he watched Chloe staring at him cross armed. She was mad and upset; but the soothing plea from Rachel had tempered her rage into cool anger. It was at least enough to see that he could see she seemed to be seriously mulling over the proposition he had offered her.

There was still hope, he supposed…

"You don't… you don't think it's too late for that?" Chloe questioned him wearily, her words
suspicious as she seemed ready to jump on any of his missteps.

Tired and very upset with himself, Ryan could only shrug his shoulders.

"It's never too late to have someone who cares about you, Chloe," he reminded her.

Chloe blinked and sort of did a double take at the response she got. It was an observation she never really seemed to think about before. She looked again to Rachel, as though Rachel could answer it for her. Rachel remained silent and looked at her own feet instead. The answer was clear. This wasn't anything Rachel could help her with. The decision was Chloe's alone.

Chloe emitted an audible swallowing noise as she seemed to push down all her anger. She stepped forward and looked him in the eyes.

"I'll… think about it…" Chloe murmured to him. She reached and jabbed his chest hard with her index as she added. "…but you're still a fucking asshole, and I'm still mad at you no matter what."

Ryan accepted that and nodded. He stepped out of Chloe's way. Or rather, Ryan allowed her to push him out of her way with a shoulder check. He silently watched as Chloe stomped up the stairs to the garage entrance into the house and slammed the door shut behind her, leaving Ryan standing alone with Rachel, who had opened the truck door up to retrieve a duffle bag which they had been looking to take in the first place.

As Rachel shut the door behind her, she turned her attention to Ryan. There was no malice or anger, there was no feeling one way or another, and that probably scared him more than he expected. One would think that an 18 year old wasn't something to fear… but the way she held herself… it was just different.

"If she agrees, you better mean it, Ryan…" was all she had to say to him.

Rachel quirked her lips up into a slight smile and stepped by Ryan, leaving him with the realization that it was the first time she had used his first name. Ryan frowned as he watched Rachel follow after Chloe, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

He wasn't entirely certain he had liked that...

Chapter End Notes

Oh man this fell on a Sunday again. Oh well. Thanks as always for reading.
Hephaestus and Aion: Part One

Taking a drag of her cigarette, Rachel Amber rolled her bare toes into the wet sands of Alki Beach.

It was somewhat strange to be alone like this. Having spent all summer attached to the hip of her girlfriend, for her to be here alone had been an odd mixture of relaxing and uncomfortable. She did not have to watch herself, or say she was okay when she was not. It was not that Chloe never picked up the signs. It was quite the opposite in an almost annoying way.

Chloe had developed this masculine trait to want to solve every problem that she had. It seemed as though Dad was probably the root cause to it. Now while she did like it that Chloe actually gave enough of a shit to want to help her, sometimes she just wanted to be left alone to stew in whatever was on her mind. Right now it was her Mother.

There was no particular reason why Rose had entered her mind these past few days. Perhaps it was seeing how much love Victoria's mother held for her since they taken up residence in the Chase home. Rachel supposed that in the end it was that she just missed her. This feeling was not new. It surfaced every so often, and there was nothing sweet doting Chloe could do or say to alleviate that feeling. As soon as they got back to Arcadia Bay, she would have to check up on her. Make sure nothing had grown over it in her absence.

She really should have asked Sera to help her. She knew that Sera visited Mom too; but she did not want to ask too much from Sera, who was already helping Dad as it was. Between helping the living and honouring the dead, the dead, unfortunately, had to come second.

Rachel turned back and for the first time since she arrived at Alki Beach she acknowledged the lingering distant spirit of Max Caulfield, who was at a concession stand getting ice cream, like the adorable sweetheart she was.

The two them forewent the truck and instead decided upon taking public transportation to the beach. There were two reasons for this. The first was that Rachel wanted to give Chloe a means to escape to wherever she needed to go. After the incident Ryan and her continued distrust of Victoria, Chloe needed to be able to do her own thing without Rachel there. The second was that she did not exactly want to subject poor Max Caulfield to her awful driving skills. Max was like a bunny. One bad scare and she would probably have a heart attack or something.

Unspoken was the third and most important reason for forgoing the rust bucket. Without Chloe and Victoria haunting them, and Rachel having to navigate through a relatively strange city with a girl who had question dictating skills, public transportation gave her an opportunity to focus squarely on Max and figure her out. Her probing questions could be masked just random conversation. Max seemed none the wiser and did not really ask any questions back.

Alternatively, Max was busy doing making her observations into Rachel in complete silence. She could never tell just what it was that Max was thinking. Max was far too polite to tell Rachel just what was on her mind.

So there Max and Rachel were. The two of them were dancing around each other attempting to figure each other out, and it was all because of Chloe. For Max, she must have saw Rachel as some sort of interloper. A replacement Max who had helped Chloe and decided she wanted her for herself. At least that was the impression. Rachel did not mind Max being in her girlfriend's life. As far as she saw, Max was nothing short of perfectly innocent.
The problem remained firmly rooted in Chloe's eagerness to please her old best friend and because of it, Rachel was less and less confident about her theory that it was just an excited reunion and more and more Victoria's conviction that Chloe looked at Max as more than a friend rooted deeper inside her.

How was it exactly she could fix that? All that she saw for sure was that Max and she had to be friends. Chloe just needed some time to cool down from her elation. In the meantime, the riddle of Max Caulfield was still something she had to solve.

When she had volunteered herself as a model, perhaps it was a bit presumptuous that Max would use her in a traditional model/photographer way. Max was, after all, a tad more hipsterish than she expected. Instead, she informed Rachel that she wanted to try something a little different. She called it incognito photography. Rachel called it spying plain and simple. Nonetheless, when Max and Rachel got off the busy, Max gave her a 20-minute head start.

To get these shots meant that Max had to trade in her Polaroid Cameras for something a little more high tech. All it took was asking Victoria Chase to loan her equipment out. Asking Victoria for anything was akin to pulling teeth, but Max could do it with a couple of bats of her fucking eyelashes and Victoria melted right in front of Rachel shamelessly. It was mushy and sweet and renewed Rachel's spirit that Max had no plots for Chloe. God, Victoria and Max were too cute. It reminded Rachel of the old days when Chloe and her spoke in nothing but romantic language to one another. It felt like such a long time ago. They still did it, but there was now always an undercurrent of self-awareness.

As Rachel inhaled a drag of her cigarette and took another step into the water, she ignored Max as she raised her camera to take an impromptu shot of the older blonde girl. It felt somewhat more scripted, more of what Rachel had expected. She did not turn back until she felt a small tap on her shoulder. Fingers brushed against Tattooed flesh which was still sensitive to the touch.

Rachel did not voice her jolt. She instead directed her attention Max, standing there with two separate ice cream cones and a modest expression as she held them out to Rachel as though she was seeking her approval.

"So…" Max spoke up shyly. "I got strawberry and vanilla… wasn't sure what you wanted."

Rachel felt her petty mistrusts wash away once again. It was a familiar feeling these days. Every time she was alone and thinking too much, Max was a potential problem, but the moment Max was next to her and speaking all her fears washed away into humiliation. She was Rachel fucking Amber. She did not have time for being this foolish.

Moreover, she would certainly not gush over the sweet nature that Max possessed. She would fall victim like Chloe and Victoria before her.

"Max, you didn't have to…" Rachel said as she stubbed out her cigarette and was about to flick it when she noticed the expression on Max's face. It appeared that for Max, littering offended her to her core. So Rachel paused and watched as Max put both cones into one hand and dug into her satchel bag and retrieved a small plastic baggie filled with cigarette butts.

Max opened it and held it out to Rachel expectantly. Rachel looked at her oddly but decided against saying anything. She instead stepped out of the water and reached out, dropping the cigarette in. The action immediately earned Rachel a return of Max's dazzling smile as she fiddled with closing the bag.

"Sorry if I'm annoying. Victoria smokes and flicks them as well… It's kind of gross," Max
apologized needlessly as she dropped the bag back into her satchel. "Also, I think I got some good shots. Ice Cream is the least I can do…"

As Max offered up the two cones once again, Rachel allowed her a smile and took the strawberry and took her first lick. Together the two of them stood there on the edge of the water.

"For the record, strawberry is a favourite of mine," Rachel said as she bumped against Max. "As are any sort of ripple. Oh and Pistachio if that's still a thing…"

Max and she shared a small laugh and in silence as the two of them walked up the beach, eating ice cream in a surprisingly comfortable silence. It was hard to believe that the two of them were so comfortable in each other's company so quickly; but it wasn't really to Rachel. It felt as though she had finally found the source of Chloe's good nature after their years together. It all felt so familiar.

So why then exactly was it that Max looked so close to having a panic attack around her all the time?

Was Max just naturally nervous? Was it because of her? She could come off as somewhat hard to deal with. Honestly, in a sea of difficult women she had to deal with in Arcadia Bay, Max was something she had never dealt with before: A modest, earnest soul. Chloe had earnest down, but she was a little too punk rock about it.

"Hey… Rachel… you were really great," Max spoke up as she ran her hand on her shorts, her cone now finished. "You know there's this real darkness to you. It's like sort of an undercurrent of… I don't know the right word… repressed anxiety, I guess…"

Max trailed off and noticed Rachel had stopped moving and instead was staring at her for her comments. Rachel watched in palpable silence as Max visually shrunk.

"You just…" Max struggled, her hand rubbing her arm. "You channelled it really well today. You're a natural at this, Rachel."

Rachel remained silent as she examined Max. There was only one thought on her mind: How much did she know? Chloe respected their shared history enough not to go out and blurt the darkest things that haunted the two of them. Victoria, on the other hand, wasn't bound to any promises. What stopped her from saying something, anything, to get back into Max's good graces after keeping details away from her for as long as she had?

Once again, however, her fears were unfounded. Max looked as confused and lost as Rachel looked inquisitive about figuring out if Victoria said something about Mom. After a moment, she swallowed the tension back down and nodded curtly, a smile forming back on her face.

"Well, since we're being honest, I want to say that I had a good time, but in all honesty, I don't know if I did," Rachel sighed as she reached out and took Max's arm into hers. "You see, I liked the idea of it, but I spent it all alone."

As Rachel took another lick of her ice cream, she watched Max nod as she seemed to understand where the older blonde was coming from.

"I know you don't like doing things by the books, but maybe next time we could do something more traditional, or at least you being a little more involved?" Rachel suggested, not wanting to sound bossy, but unable to deny that she wanted that point cracked through Max's mind. "I mean… It would be nice to get to talk to someone…"

Again Max nodded.
"I'm sorry, I guess it's just... Rachel, I'm not that great with people I just meet... Victoria can attest to that," Max explained to her gently, her words willed with a shame that did not have to be there. "I just... I get nervous and self-conscious and I... I'll definitely do it next time if you're still interested in working with me, that is."

Rachel offered a reassuring smile and reached out with a free hand, allowing it to drop down on Max's shoulder. She could feel Max's pulsating tension through her fingertips as the shorter girl looked up to her. The sight of the smile seemed to do a wonder in helping to relax the expression on Max's face that said quite clearly how much she wanted to flee from her.

"I'm hella interested in it," Rachel gently reassured her newest friend. "You really don't have to fear me, Caulfield..."

Rachel trailed off and took in the blank expression Max wore. Of course, she was confused. You could take the girl out of Oregon, but you could not take the Oregon out of the girl. At least Max was being polite about it...

"Hella..." Rachel repeated, rolling her eyes. "It's a Cali thing... I swear you Oregon girls are clueless..."

That did wonders to break through Max's tendencies to submit to the teasing of Rachel, and by extension Chloe. With a small giggle, Max actually fucking hip checked her hard enough to make Rachel move.

"Shut up..." Max mumbled at her. "...vapid Cali hippie..."

Rachel giggled and let go of Max. She reached out and booped her finger against the tip of Max's nose. The indignant reaction she gave made it never get old.

"Oh my... Maxie has a little bite to her. Must be all that Icky Vicky tongue you've been swallowing," Rachel teased as Max rubbed her nose and attempted get control of the situation once again. "You know, I'd be careful who you call a hippie, hipster..."

At the mere mention of Victoria and her dalliances, Max's face was beet red. She did not acknowledge it, and instead, she looked at Rachel's unblinking expression curiously.

"Maxie?" Max repeated, a little unsure of what to make of the new pet name Rachel had arbitrarily decided to use.

Rachel merely smiled and stepped forward.

"Chloe gets Max and all the fun little variations, and Victoria gets the tres romantique Maxine..." Rachel pointed out to Max, amused by how flushed Max had become so quickly. "Soooo... I think it's only right I get to use Maxie for my new friend... or is this not agreeable?"

Rachel took a final ick of her ice cream and gazed at the blank freckled cutie. Perhaps she had went all little too full tilt flirty with poor Maxie, but she it seemed like she had got her way and that was what was important right now. As Max seemed to acquiesce to the request, Rachel patted her cheek and stepped back into the ocean.

"Thank you, Maxie..." Rachel spoke back to Max without looking. "...and please feel free to think of a pet name for me. I would not want you to be left out of the games we play... I'm surprised though you haven't found a name for Vicky yet..."

From behind her, Maxie blurted something out which Rachel hadn't quite expected.
"I was thinking that maybe tonight, you could stay at my house," Max suggested quietly. "No Chloe or Victoria to keep the tension dialled to 11. Just us, we can talk about things. You can get me updated properly, I'll fill you in with what I have, and we can just have fun. We won't have any pressures to keep them from tearing each other apart."

Shin deep in the Puget Sound, Rachel turned back to look at Maxie, who remained steady. She had to admit... the idea was a tempting one. Max and her just fucking relaxing would be an interesting experience. She could continue her understanding of Max under the guise of a sleepover.

"What about Victoria and Chloe, Maxie?" Rachel decided to inquire, probing to see how committed Max was to this. "You don't think they'd feel out of the loop?"

Max, much to Rachel surprise, only shrugged.

"Maybe," Max admitted to her. "Right now they can have some time together as well. We have been peacekeeping all week."

Rachel nodded. That was definitely they had been doing since they got here... certainly far more than Rachel liked to...

"I don't think your parents like me all too much..." Rachel confessed once again, her glum tone surprising even herself. More importantly was the fact she even admitted that to Max.

Max, it seemed, just had a disarming quality to her.

"I spent a long time keeping my nose down, not wanting to cause them problems," Max dismissed with a shrug of her shoulders. "I think I am allowed to have a friend they might not approve of..."

Max trailed off as Rachel pulled off her cut up homemade Skinny Puppy shirt and revealed her off pink bikini. She threw the shirt at Max.

"Come on in, Maxie," she invited her new friend to join her. "...Or are you afraid of the water?"

Max blinked.

"No, but... I mean... Victoria's stuff..." Max sputtered out. "It's more expensive than everything I own combined, and then times that by three."

Rachel rolled her eyes and stomped back out of the water and approached Max, who had the audacity to fold up Rachel's ratty old shirt for her, as though that was something it needed. She scooped the shirt back from Max and threw it in the sand, grabbing both of Max's shoulders.

"Well, it's a good thing you have Victoria Chase wrapped around your little finger, isn't it?" Rachel pointed out gaily as she leaned in almost nose to nose with Max. "If batting your eyelashes does not work, then I guess I'll have to teach you how to be wet, dripping sex... she won't know what will hit her..."

Rachel let go of Max's shoulders, allowing her hand to reach out and grab the strap of Max's satchel. She silently eased the pack off Max's shoulder without any sort of resistance and allowed it to rest on her shirt. Max stood there, stunned and debating whether or not she wanted to go along and swim with Rachel.

"Now come along..." Rachel said., smirking as she stepped backwards into the warm waves. "If you can swim, then it really isn't a request..."
Thankfully for everyone involved, Max wasn't about to challenge her today.
Dropping her *Vogue* onto the floor next to the chaise longue, Victoria Chase rolled onto her stomach, her arms clinging to her stomach as if somehow that would somehow stop the incessant and painful phantom throbbing building inside of her. It did not and in fact left her all the more miserable.

The cause of it was quite simple, really. Rachel Amber. Much more specifically than that, it was Maxine who had called her and told her that Rachel and her would be having a girls night tonight. No Chloe though – thank fuck – it was just a night for Max to spend it alone with a new… friend. All of this seemed to her to be a Rachel plot.

Victoria didn't believe for a second that Rachel was plotting to snatch away Maxine from her or anything foolish. For better or worse, Rachel was in love with that grimy punk girl who was sitting in Father's study, blasting music and talking with Father and Mother about it as though they were new besties. It was hard to believe that the two of them fell for her 'charm' so soon, but she it really brought her piss to a boil that Price could be so influential on others so easily. The world liked their fake punk hard asses apparently.

Although Victoria was not exactly a fan of Chloe eye fucking Maxine at every presented opportunity, at least Victoria knew it was simple lust and an undertone of childhood crush. That was something she could combat it if it got too bad. Victoria knew she was a goddess and all it would take was a little effort to firmly root herself in Max. By the time she was done, she would make Price a distant memory.

Rachel, on the other hand, was entirely different level of a threat to her and Maxine, and it scared her far more than anything Chloe could do. Although Rachel had not done or said anything to make her suspect her of treachery, the simple fact that Rachel and her ran in similar circles was the cause of this growing tension inside her. Rachel was far more involved in the social aspects of the school that Chloe did not involve herself in. She knew all of Victoria's worst moments and now she was spending the night with the one person whose opinion of her Victoria actually gave a shit about.

Jesus, this reunion might have been great for Maxine and Price, but it was killing Victoria, and probably Rachel too, who jealously guarded her man hand girlfriend as though she was something worth losing. All this sleepover was, was to gauge if Max was going to be a problem. The more she spent time with Max, the more Rachel learned about her, and the more she could use against Max if worse came to worse.

Most annoying about this exclusive sleepover was that it had completely run over the surprise that Victoria had planned for Maxine. There was an art show being thrown by Madison Xu, and while she was not a big fan of going, Maxine showed interest in Xu's work, and Victoria could not back out of the invitation. She told her parents that she would be willing to serve as the Chase ambassador for the night, so to not show would be social suicide.

So there she was, stuck going to a soiree. If she could not take Maxine, then… she supposed an alternative was available. Victoria sighed, pushed herself off the furniture, and slowly approached the door. She would rather eat a pound of broken glass then do what she was about to do.
God, she hoped that no one she knew would be there, for what she was about to do was going to be so embarrassing.

As Victoria stepped out of the room, she was spared having to knock on Chloe's door, or interrupt Chloe and her parents and embarrass herself in front of them; because sitting there with her phone in her hand was Chloe, who had been clearly startled by Victoria's sudden appearance.

It looked as though she had been crying right up until the moment that Victoria opened the door. The two of them just looked at each other. Victoria was locked in silence as Chloe stared up at Victoria. She was just daring the younger blonde girl to make a comment; but Victoria remained silent. She probably wouldn't have if she hadn't known Maxine.

"What in the hell do you want?" Price blurted out to her, her voice thick sounding.

In her silence, Victoria decided it was in their best interest not to address it. She would let the phoney at least have her dignity. She reached out and surprised Chloe by yanking her back to her feet. Thankfully, the girl in name only did not resist her. She trudged sloppily after Victoria; the only resistance was her trying to pull her arm out of Victoria's grasp.

"We're going out tonight," Victoria announced, leaving no room for debate as she dragged Chloe into her bedroom. "There's an art show gathering that I was going to take Max to, but your girlfriend snaked her away; so now you're coming with me instead."

Pushing Chloe in the direct of her bed, Victoria released her hand from Chloe and made a point to wipe her hand along her leg. She turned away and opened her walk–in closet as she ignored to the best of her abilities the glare radiating from Chloe. It was impotent, but it was still uncomfortable to stare into for too long. Sometimes, it was creep just how much she adapted from Amber.

"You're about my size, even if you got this shapeless boy body, you're going to wear something nice and you're going to attempt to not embarrass me," Victoria mused, casually insulting the girl behind her as she idly thumbed through a selection of dresses she was ready to sacrifice to Price's body, and then to a thrift shop or something.

She was not being a malicious bitch for no reason. No, she had a reason to act this way. Maybe she was uncomfortable by the idea of Chloe Price crying. Price had been such a fixture of strength that seeing her like that was an uncomfortable experience. Victoria could not think of anyone else who at 16 managed to walk someone else through their grief as Chloe had for Rachel. Maybe acting like a bitch was a way to direct anger from Chloe instead of tears. She could handle a pissed of Price far better than this unknown.

Yet, in spite of her prodding, there was no reaction of rage as Victoria had predicted. Chloe remained still and despondent. Victoria stole a glance over her shoulder and noticed Chloe was staring at her phone again. Victoria looked away again. Did she have a fight with Rachel or something?

Whatever, it wasn't any of her business.

"I wasn't crying."

Like clockwork, Chloe's defense second nature kicked back into gear, and Victoria closed her eyes and exhaled before she turned back.

"You were crying," Victoria refuted, annoyed that Chloe tried to deny it. "But I'm going to let you in on a secret: I don't exactly give a shit about your feelings, or whatever the fuck drama you get
into. I'm not your shoulder to cry on. We're not friends; you're just the inconvenience I now live with."

Victoria blinked, and too did Chloe who looked actually startled by Victoria's words. This was not an easy feat. As much as Victoria might have hated to say what she said, there was a small part of her that regaled in her ability to knock Price off her axis. Besides, all that shameless flirting with Max, Chloe deserved this fully.

"Oh… good… Like I want to hear you talk any more than I have to," Price muttered as she pocketed her phone. "Why Max keeps telling me that we can be friends is beyond me."

Victoria rolled her eyes.

"At least we are perfectly in line in that," she returned as she turned away, directing her focus back to finding Chloe something that was vaguely wearable for her.

Several minutes of digging through dresses and she found this cute little Italian tailored thigh length black and crimson party dress. It always felt a little too… edgy for her, but Taylor liked it and wore it a couple times. It looked good on her, so Victoria held onto it. A small smile graced her lips as turned back and showed it off to Price, whose mouth was a gaped. Like Victoria had lost her mind for seriously considering this.

Yes… this dress would be perfect.

"Now… I'll get you a purse for added aesthetic values," Victoria said as she laid the dress down next to Chloe and daintly stepped back into the closet. "How about some nice black stockings to accessorize, God only knows if you even know how to wax, so I guess we'll play it safe…"

As she gently ran her fingers along her shelved collection of purses, she glanced back to see Chloe had picked the outfit up to inspect it closer. She looked horrified by the prospects. It was not her first time in a dress, and Victoria knew it. She wore one for Rose's funeral. She… managed to pull it off them so why not now?

"I'm not wearing a dress, Vicky…" Price breathed, her tone stiffening as she looked up and met Victoria's narrowed eyes.

Grabbing one of her Chanel purses and closing the drawer, Victoria stepped out of the closet and approached Price. Victoria dropped the purse next to the dress and stood over her, her mouth forming into a small knowing smirk as she took in Price's growing discomfort.

"Chloe Price, the chicken shit," Victoria taunted her. "Why am I not surprised you would freak out over a dress. You would rather be safe in your monotony. However, I guess that is you in fucking spades, isn't it?"

Victoria leaned close and stared unblinking into Chloe's searching eyes. It seemed as though badgering Chloe was doing the trick. She would have to remember it.

"I suppose that playing second fiddle to Rachel must just make everything so much easier for you..." Victoria twisted the verbal blade a little deeper into Chloe. "It's just so easy to blend in and let Rachel do the lifting. That is just such a brave and powerful thing to do. You are a real modern day Patti Smith aren't you-"

"Fuck it," Chloe said exacerbated, leaping up off the bed and pushing Victoria out of the way. "If it gets you off my back, fine, I'll do it."
Grabbing the dress, Chloe stormed out of the bed and Victoria followed after her, pausing at the doorway.

"Shower, get dressed and I'll do your makeup!" Victoria shouted to Chloe's back. "You're going to thank me. It's going to be fun!"

It wasn't.

...

Laying spread out on Max's bed, Rachel Amber was left alone with herself and that was, for her, just the worst feeling she could have.

When she was all alone and not focused on anything in particular, her mind wandered, and her mind wandering led to thoughts and feelings she had spent such a long time trying not to think about. Most notable of which were about Mom, these were the standard grief induced longing. It was stupid, and even now with years, these feelings had not faded at all. Perhaps it was because she was interacting with far too many loving, doting mothers since her arrival in Seattle. It was causing some sort of reminder of what a mother was and what she no longer had real access to.

Sera – as hard as she was working to be a mother – was not Rose. Sometimes, it felt as though Sera just wanted to be a friend, and that was great. But rarely did flares of motherly instinct kick up. Rachel did not blame her for that. It was still an instinct Sera was learning. But that willingness to overlook Sera's learning curve, did not mean she did not want her Rose back. It did not mean she didn't want her back.

Thinking about this also left her with a second sort of guilt which she could not help but feel utterly terrible. Everything Chloe had done… everything she put up with and suppressed her own guilt and loss… all of it was for nothing if Rachel still wanted to scream and burn the world down for what happened to Rose. Burn the world even though she played a role. Her rash split second decision making killed her Mother. It was that simple.

Rachel supposed being the reason she was dead was going to linger over her for a long time to come. Every other night she still dreamed of forcing Chloe to plug Rose's gunshot wound, as though it would save her. God… fuck… she forced a 16 year old into an impossible situation… there was no forgiving that.

So here she was, laying on Max's bed. Max was off… somewhere. Apparently, she had a little surprise for her. It sounded like she was cornered by Vanessa on her way downstairs though and Rachel pretended not to listen to the passively aggressive questioning Vanessa had used against Max. The underlying message was obvious to her, even though the walls. Rachel was not someone she wanted in her home. Chloe she could understand, and Victoria was fine… even if Victoria was one hot and heavy sentence away from fucking Max into the ground… but Rachel… Rachel was an unknown to the mother.

It was not really that much of a surprise anymore that there was a tension caused by her mere presence. Dinner was just as awkward an affair for Rachel and Max's parents. Between Vanessa's inclination to mistrust of her, and now the strange state of affair between Ryan and her since Ryan confessed his absent guilt to Chloe and her Rachel just wanted to get dinner over and done with. So Rachel played the good guest and faked her way through the dinner. She did not want to cause any sort of problem for Max, who seemed to love her parents.
Idly Rachel glanced over to the bedside table and took in the surprise selfie she took with Victoria. A month in and already she was adorning her room with trinkets of Victoria. God, Max had it bad. It reminded her of someone.

As the door cracked open, Rachel set the photo back down and sat up as Maxie emerged into the bedroom, closing the door behind her with one hand and in the other, that familiar liquor store brown paper bag in the other. As Rachel caught Max's eye, she watched a small curiously familiar mischievous smile cross onto Max's mouth.

"Had to hide it in the backyard My friend Kristen's older sister is 21. Chloe said you like wine, and that you get interesting when you drink, so... I thought you would like this..." Max babbled gently as she held the bottle in front of her chest. "Maybe just... well maybe exercise moderation, please? Last thing I need is Mom mad at me for this."

Rachel stared at the bottle of wine, faintly amused and conscious of the fact she had MDMA tablets on her pocket. Wine didn't quite have the kick it had when she was still just a baby dabbling in ways to erase the growing tension in her. Rachel chastised herself, it was the thought that counted and it looked to be a fifty-dollar bottle of red. She was not going to look down on it.

With that in consideration, Rachel decided to agree to Max's terms, and pushed herself off the bed. She placed her most dazzling smile on her lips and pressed her lips against little Maxie's cheek as she reached out and took the bottle. Rachel watched in mild satisfaction as the girl melted in front of her.

"Maxine Caulfield, if I did not know any better, I would say you planned this sleepover..." Rachel coyly observed as she stepped back and unfastened the screw top, taking a small drink.

She decided to pace herself. She didn't want to embarrass herself in front of her new friend so quickly. That could wait until later. Judging from her half-open mouth, Max looked like she wanted to say something. Probably wanted to get them glasses and drink coasters first.

"Thanks, but really this is really sweet of you, Maxie," Rachel added as she extended the bottle back out to Max. "You're going to join me, right?"

Max's eyes widened at the suggestion and Rachel immediately winced. She should have suspected Max Caulfield was not a girl ventured into drinking very often. Not everyone was a lush like her.

"Sorry... you don't have to, Maxie," Rachel apologized to her. "I shouldn't have assumed you were into that sort of thing."

Not wanting an apology, Max just shook her head swiftly, smiling at Rachel.

"No its fine, Rachel," Max reassured her politely. "I guess that drinking never really interested me like others I know. Everyone my age just needs to get wasted, and I guess I'm not into it... and I'm not trying to shame you or anything. Wowser, I'm going to shut up now."

Max's rambling earned a genuine laugh from Rachel.

"Oh God, you really are a little hipster, aren't you?" Rachel lightly teased Max as Caulfield sat down on the bed. "I bet you like tea and listen to folk music. The sort of music Chloe is pretending not to listen to since we made it here."

Listening to Max's trilled laugh, Rachel allowed a grin to spread across her mouth as she looked away. The two of them lapsed into silence. Max was looking through Victoria's digital camera at her shots as Rachel paced herself with the wine and wondered if she could open a window and
smoke out of it. Vanessa and Ryan seemed to be a stickler about smoking in the house.

Deciding she could hold out for her nicotine craving for a while, Rachel stepped back to bed and dropped herself next to Max, who looked up startled at the sudden invasion of her personal space. Rachel grinned and looked at the photo Max was examining. It was of her pushing through the final trees to get to the beach. Rachel might not have been a fan of the style, but she could not deny that they looked great.

Max looked up and met Rachel's eyes, her face tingeing pink as she looked away.

"Kind of creepy, right?" Max denigrated herself and her work in a mumble. "It really wasn't what I wanted it to turn out. I'm so sorry-"

Rachel reached out and took Chloe's hand, lowering her head and getting right up into her line of sight. She had heard of Max's famous ability to deride herself to a point of self-induced humiliation from Chloe and to a lesser extent Victoria. This was the first time she saw it in the flesh. Max had so much talent and the idea of her just… being this malicious to herself was bothering the hell out of her already.

"Relax, Max. These are great," Rachel reassured her, unblinking as she squeezed her hand. "You don't have to apologize to me about your artistic direction. You don't have to apologize to anyone."

Max bit her lip as she stared back at Rachel, searching to see if Rachel was just going through the motions. Slowly, she nodded. Max was still very unsure of her own abilities, but she was not about to push the topic any more than it had already gone. Rachel felt the same as well; well… not today at least, Max's confidence issues was something they would all have to work on together…

"It's strange, I haven't had a sleepover like this in a very long time," Rachel admitted to Max. "Funny thing about dating a girl: All your friends assume you're going to try and sleep with them as well…"

She wasn't entirely sure why she had admitted that to Max. Perhaps it was just something that was bothering her for quite some time. She loved Chloe, but she sort of missed the days where people in her age bracket didn't just slap a label on her. The comfort of hiding her feelings was nice, and she understood why Victoria did it more than she cared to admit.

"…and I'm guessing that Chloe doesn't let you do a lot of genuine sleeping when she's spending the night…" Max murmured out, a ghostly trace of coyness colouring her words.

Rachel playfully gasped and pushed little Maxie away from her. She honestly hadn't expected that much daring from her.

"Maxie, that is so lewd of you… I love it," Rachel chastised with a grin. She nodded as she added. "Yes, Chloe has a libido, and I while really don't mind satisfying it, sometimes nights such as these are preferable. However, I suppose you will be learning all about that soon enough…"

"No... I-I… haven't really thought too much about it," Max almost stuttered as she refused to look at Rachel's playful grin. "When I have I… Rachel, I'm not good at any of this. Victoria probably has more… you know…"

Max trailed off and Rachel could not help but snort.

"Experience?" Rachel finished for Max as she attempted not to laugh. "You do realize that Victoria is fumbling in the dark as well, right?"
"Can you tell me?!" Max suddenly blurted out without any waiting or tact.

Arching her brow, Rachel examined Maxie carefully. Did Max want to know how to bang Victoria or something? She supposed she could, but she was certain Chloe would not be a fan of her teaching her how to fuck Chase. She'd probably call her a traitor for helping Victoria out like that.

"Can you tell me more about Victoria, I mean... not... that.." Max added on suddenly, making much more sense now.

Rachel blinked. Oh… that was… Okay, yeah she could do that.

"I like her, Rachel, but then you and Chloe showed up and you all know each other and Victoria didn't tell me and I've seen her be… vicious and tense ever since," Max pressed, her voice edged with growing worry. "Chloe obviously hates her, but she's not saying why beyond the standard 'Chloe hates preppy girls' which I always knew. I'm trying to figure what's been make believe How she was since I met her, and how she was since you two arrived."

Taking another drink, this time much more than what she was pacing before, Rachel eyed Max and her determined expression. She wanted answers to question Rachel knew in her private talks with Victoria whenever Chloe and Max took off to do Chloe and Max things.

Perhaps it was best if she did give Max what she had gathered from Victoria's ravings. It would help Victoria to stop beating around the bush if Max actually knew what was going on in her head. At some point fumbling in the dark stopped being cute and started being detrimental.

Damn it, she would tell Max…

"I don't think that even Victoria knows who she is," Rachel sighed out to the attentive girl at her side. "She's lived a life where she can have everything handed to her, and has by parents who love her and shower her with praise and material wealth. She's never been abused or neglected… but she's bored of it She wants to strike out and do her own thing, but she's convinced herself the only way to get what she wants is through ruthless undermining. Therefore, it makes her angry, vindictive, calculating, and just… bitter."

Rachel looked over to Max, who was slightly frowning. Taking a drink from the bottle, Rachel reached out and draped her arm around Caulfield's shoulder.

"But then, one day Victoria miraculously meets an adorably cute, friendly - and most importantly – trustworthy certain someone," she coyly continued as she watched Max twist and turn next to her. "Now Victoria has a peer who shares her interests and challenges her and doesn't care where she comes from and what she has, and she sees that she doesn't have to be a cynical conniving mean bitch. She finally has someone who she could trust… if she is brave enough to open her heart to that."

"That is a problem too, however," she tacked on to her attentive audience. "Vulnerability for Victoria is a huge insecurity and trusting you with her heart is a huge deal. I do not think she has ever had a person she could do that with, not even her closest friends. She painted herself into a corner with her social life and now has to battle between the two identities: What the people in her social circle see, what her enemies like Chloe see… and what she wants to be and what she wants to share with just you."

Rachel sighed. Victoria Chase was an exhausting subject.

"So it made her do stupid, silly illogical shit like keep the truth away from you," Rachel pressed on.
"She feared that your opinion of her would alter if Chloe started shit talking her. You are Chloe's friend after all, and she believes in seniority. In her mind, she would come second to Chloe, and anything Chloe told you would be law. You would abandon her at Chloe's demand."

"That's so stupid though, I'd never do that..." Max blurted out, her tone genuinely filled with anger at the implication.

She paused, hanging her head in shame as the ghosts of her actions hung over her head. Rachel looked away and remained silent as she waited for Max to walk that back.

"I'm well aware I messed up with Chloe," Max amended, opening her eyes to look at Rachel once again. "But that was a terrible and strange set of circumstance that I regretted ever since... abandoning someone because Chloe said so... Rachel, I would never play around with my friends like that... or whatever we are."

Rachel stared at Max's earnest expression. Max was clearly contrite for the past and was taking steps to correct her part in that total (and two-way) shit show. She nodded, smiling reassuringly.

"I know that now, but Victoria Chase does not deal in leaps of faith," Rachel informed as she pushed herself back onto her elbows. "She did the only natural thing she knew could work: she hid the fact, hoping that summer would fly by and you would never question what school she went to or anything like that. Leaving you in the dark was a small price to pay for both of yours bliss together. It all boils down to trust, and Victoria has spent much of her school life unable to trust anyone because if she could lie to herself about what she was and treat people like shit about what she also felt, how could she ever trust anyone?"

Taking a heavy drink, Rachel was about to rest it on the bedside table when Max took the bottle from herself and took a tentative drink. Rachel could sympathize with her. The girls they were dating were pig-headed as fuck. At least now, she would have Max who would have a semblance of understanding.

Handing the bottle back to her, Max faced Rachel once again. The corners of her lips twitching from the drink she took.

"Did she say cruel things to you both?" Max asked her slowly. "Is that why Chloe hates her?"

Rachel stared into Max's worried expression. The very idea of Victoria being awful to Rachel and Chloe was a disturbing thing Max seemed to both wanted to know and didn't want to know at the same time.

"She said stupid, cruel, painful self-reflective things to Chloe and I, yes," she admitted to Max, carefully controlling her tone. "I don't hold what she said against her. I have other things on my mind to care what some angry closeted rich girl thinks about me, but you know Chloe. She doesn't get that it's just Victoria's fear of herself lashing out. The moment someone says something remotely bad about me, she's goes into a knight mode, and with that her need defend a maiden's honour."

A small grin crossed over her lips as she nursed the wine. Yeah... like she had any honour left to protect.

"It's dorky, but I... kind of think it's hot..." she confessed. She cleared her throat and quickly added. "Anyways... moving on now..."

Rachel handed the bottle to Max and pushed herself off the bed, idly removing her open flannel
shirt, dropping it to the ground as she idly pushed her fingers over the neck section of the tattoo, taking a perverse sort of pleasure in the tingling the sensitive flesh still suffered from.

"So… this tattoo, I wanted to ask about it," Max blurted out. "It seems a little drastic."

Rachel hung her head and shook her head, unable to contain her amusement. She turned back and saw Max was standing there, the wine left on the bedside table next to her photo of Victoria. Rachel nodded, acknowledging both that Max was a modest person and that Rachel herself might have gone a little too far in places.

"Yeah, it was," Rachel admitted to Caulfield faintly as she rubbed her forehead and leaned against her computer desk. "I got it for my Mom. I don't think she's going to like it though, but fuck it, her name is Rose and I'm a cliche, I guess."

"I'm sure she'll love it," Max reassured her.

Rachel's smile faltered just a bit as Max absent-mindedly turned away. All this time that they were reunited, and Chloe hadn't told her what had happened to the two of them? Hell, she expected Victoria to blurt it out or something. Apparently not, and now Max was in the dark. How did one go about telling her that her best friend was being stalked and it only got worse from there?

This felt like a conversation Chloe should be having. Someone with more history with Max then she had. The last thing she wanted to do was start talking about Mom and just crying right there in front of her. Yes, Chloe was a better choice for that. Or maybe Victoria… if Victoria was capable of tact.

"Chloe doesn't really speak about me to you, does she?" Rachel found herself needing to ask her.

Max turned back as she finished fiddling with her iPod set up on a speaker system. She pushed her bangs to one side and tilted her head to one side.

"No, she does… as long as it's about the two of you," Max explained to her, clearly worried she may have offended Rachel. "If you value your privacy it's fine. I understand; I have a long way to go before I can just be a friend again."

Rachel sighed and shook her head.

It's not that," she said slowly. "I do value my privacy. It is… well, it's complicated. You matter a lot to Chloe, and so I have to… I have to let go of her just a little. Otherwise we're all going to be on separate levels; and I don't want you to feel like I am cutting you out or something stupid."

"That… really means a lot to me, Rachel," Max replied, her hands fidgeting in front of her. '"ll be honest with you too, and I'll keep your secrets… and I promise. And whatever happens in the future… you're stuck with me now as well."

Rachel mouth opened slightly. She was a little speechless, and few in this world ever did that to her. The tenderness of Chloe… it felt as though she was meeting another source of it. The early influences of Max Caulfield coloured Chloe into the woman she loved, and for that Rachel would be forever grateful to Max. She was not perfect – no one was of course – but she did not have to be.

She might have been venturing into gaining a new friend. But here, in a moment not of her making, she had finally gained one; and she would cherish it for as long as had on this earth.

Rachel stepped forward and pushed her arms around Max's shoulders, holding her tight against her. She closed her eyes and smiled as she felt Max tentatively hug her back.
"I am a very good reader of people, Max Caulfield, and I don't think you could deceive me, even if you tried," Rachel said as she cleared her throat. "I don't think you ever would deceive me period… still… still, it is sweet for you to say so."

As Max blushed and offered up a stream of words which Rachel chose not to acknowledge, Rachel pulled away from Max and quietly walked away to scoop up Max's old Polaroid camera. She turned back to find Max, both still flustered, but looking curious.

"I think it's time we add to your collage," Rachel decided, gesturing to Max's wall of friends and Victoria.

Max emitted a small nervous laugh as she rubbed the back of her neck. She did not protest too much as Rachel placed herself next to Max and offered the camera to her.

"You don't think we took enough pictures today?" Max teased her as accepted the camera in one hand and wrapped her arm around Rachel's waist.

Rachel slapped her smuggest look onto her face.

"Well, I wouldn't know how many picture you took of me in stalker mode, but now that you have someone begging to be photographed by you, this one will definitely be a first of many…" Rachel shot back.

Max hesitated, but only for a moment as she looked into Rachel's eyes. She nodded and relaxed into Rachel's shoulder. She extended the Polaroid camera out and after a moment of adjustment, Max clicked the shutter release. A flash of light momentarily blinded the two of them.

It was in that moment, Rachel Amber felt Max Caulfield collapse against her and fall to the floor with a heavy thud. The camera fell as well, hitting the small bedside rug.

"Max?" Rachel breathed out frightfully.

Wiping her eyes, Rachel focused herself on Max and watched in horror as blood trickled out of her nose. Rachel grabbed the nearest thing she could find – her flannel shirt and gently wiped the blood away and squeezed the passage tight to stem the bleeding. Even with Rachel squeezing her nose, Max was completely despondent. She laid there limply in Rachel's arms, her head lulled to one side. Her eyes were half-open but there was just… just nothing there at all.

"Max… Max… what's wrong?" Rachel whispered urgently, only moments away from going to go seek help from Caulfield's parents. "Are you really that much of a lightweight, or was it the flash-"

Max jerked violently in her arms as she came too and pushed Rachel off with a force she never expected the girl to have. Max crawled away several feet, blood dripping behind her as she wobbly found her footing. As Rachel stood as well, she stared, wide eyed as Max seemed to be examining the room as if the place was completely alien to her. Or… or somewhere she had not been in quite a while.

"Max… Max, you're scaring the shit out of me…" Rachel breathed to the girl as she stepped closer to Max, her hand outstretched.

Dazed and lost, Max blinked rapidly and breathing rapidly as though she was prone to seizures. Perhaps this was what it was; she had some sort of camera induced epileptic seizure. Still Max had not acknowledged her.

At least not until Rachel's hand gripped her forearm.
Max stiffened at the touch and turned to face Rachel. Her eyes were wide, her mouth agape and her teeth bloodstained as she stared at Rachel as though she had seen her for the first time. Tears slowly formed in Max's eyes as Rachel felt her body start to quake through her fingertips. Weak as she was, Max launched herself forward and squeezed Rachel in a tight, breathe taking hug.

"Oh my God," Max said in a voice that was strained and aged beyond her years. "You're alive… you're actually alive…"

Chapter End Notes

Happy Birthday, Rachel Amber.

Sorry for the waits as of late. Life uh finds a way to delay.
Standing there with Max still tightly lashed to her as if they were conjoined twins, Rachel had thought that she had seen all that life had to offer her. Love, pain, loss…. However, this was so perversely different from anything she ever witness before.

She wanted this all to be a sick joke that Max was engaging in. Something concocting from the minds of Victoria and Chloe so that the great Rachel Amber would get startled and thrown off guard by something so random and unanticipated. They knew that Rachel engaged in much more fanciful behaviour, and they were just playing with her head using her newfound friendship with Max as instrument to their bonding through spooking the hell out her.

As much as Rachel hoped this was the case, she had never in her life seen another person geyser blood on fucking command. Max, however, seemed unfazed by her bleed. It was almost as if it was a perfectly natural thing for her as she soaked blood into Rachel's shirt.

Max backed off, releasing Rachel from her grasp and slowly she stepped back, her legs were visibly wobbly in a way a newborn was when they were walking for the first time. Max's head twitched as her eyes rolled around in their sockets taking in her surroundings with a strange sort of sad reflection as she took it in with silence. For Rachel, it felt like Max thought that she did not belong here.

Rachel turned away from Max, silently reaching into her pocket to feel if she had the same amount of molly pills she had when she came in. Max looked as lost as Chloe did on a trip. She hoped that what it was. That she could handle.

Rachel removed her hand from her pocket. She had the same amount of pills, and she doubted Chloe or even Victoria would dose their little Max. This was something altogether different. Whatever this game was… well it was well beyond her understanding… well beyond her comprehension. She would let it play out… see where it ended up.

So Rachel remained silent and fell back onto her well-honed gift. She projected a thin veneer of control as Max's haunting words pounded into her skull in a way which she had not felt since Chloe told her through her delusions that Mom had died.

She was surprised that she was alive… what in the absolute fuck did that mean?

As Max ran her hand over her face, almost as though seeing she felt anything, she turned back Rachel. She allowed her hand to fall down and wipe the stream of blood staining her upper lip.

"It's all so… so… strange," Max creaked out, her words slurred as though she was drunk. "I… I have done something like this before… but this is something altogether different. This… reality… this is not what I expected…"

If Rachel thought Max speaking would clear up just what it was she was doing, it didn't at all. Max – or whatever she was – seemed to comprehend this and stepped back to Rachel, who instinctively
stepped back as well. Max froze and tilted her head as she saw that her mere attempt to approach Rachel elicited the growing fear brewing inside the older girl.

"I must not… I must not make a lot of sense to you," Max spoke to her, her voice strained with an odd attempt to lighten the room with humour. "I come from a place and time far removed from here and now. It feels… alien. You might as well not ask the question on your mind. You won't like the answers I have."

Some way, somehow, Max left Rachel with even more questions than before. Questions she herself could not verbalize properly any more than Max was. Rachel felt herself bump into Max's computer table. It seemed as though she had been moving without her being aware of it as she listened to Max's puzzle.

As Rachel formed words to speak, a sudden throbbing pain developed from what felt like behind her eyes. She thought she had had migraines before, but this…. This was something next level. Her vision dimmed as her head spun. Shakily she focused all the attention she could muster and found Max staring back at her with adult looking eyes. Eyes that lost all the lustre of youth people their age possessed.

Instead she looked like Sera's… exhausted by the world she was a part of, but was foreign to it.

"Max… Max, what is going on?" Rachel faintly exhaled as Max remained locked onto her.

Max remained silent as her eyes scanned Rachel in an entirely uncomfortable way. It felt like the younger girl on the spot was mentally undressing her; like Max needed to take in every detail Rachel possessed. Before she could do anything, Max reached out, snatched up her wrist, and turned it over, her eyes examining the astronomical tattoo.

"This is different, this wasn't here before," Max murmured in a trance as her finger tips pushed into Rachel's scar tissue, sending shivers up Rachel's spine. "There is so much going on and I have no bearings to go on right now. We have to start…"

Max trailed off once again as though she lost her train of thought. She released her tight grasp on Rachel and stepped backwards several paces. Rachel could not have been happier for this.

"Sorry..." Max spoke again, her eyes focusing on Rachel again as she struggled to find her voice. "I'm... This is the first time I have attempted something like this... something this... drastic. I have perverted time and space before, but nothing like this. I cannot believe you're here... in my room, and you know me... this version of me..."

The look on Rachel's face must have been one of astonishment. Max rubbed the back of her neck, it was a small tick that Rachel had thought was sweet, but now, she just seemed aggravated and angry like she had expected Rachel have just done with whatever it was she was playing.

"You don't believe me... of course..." she muttered out to Rachel half coyly, half annoyed at the idea.

Rachel dropped herself back down onto the bed and averted her eyes from Max looming over her. She might have only known her for a short while, but she knew Max vicariously through Chloe; and this Max felt so fucking wrong to her.

"I don't know what you expect for me to think, exactly," Rachel replied roughly, throwing her hand impatient in front of her. "I mean you bleed everywhere, faint and come to, making no sense whatsoever. What in the fuck is it you are hoping to achieve? If this is a prank, I don't get it-"
"In your left back pocket you have three hundred and eighty-seven dollars and thirty-four cents," Max shut her up instantly. "In your right pocket, you have three pictures. One is a picture of your adoptive mother, Rose with your father James and you on a trip to Washington D.C when you were eleven years old. You have two of birth mother Sera. One photo is of you with Sera, the other taken by your father when she was 17 years old. I won't even mention the half dozen MDMA tablets in your left pocket."

The two of them stared at each other in silence. As Rachel somehow felt even worse now as Max's accurate guess of her photos, the names of her family and their relations to her became known. Max had told her that Chloe and Victoria had not told them. Was it all just a lie?

All her hopes for that faded as soon as she slipped her fingers into her pocket and retrieved her wad of cash and counted it. By the time she reached thirty-four cents, she idly dropped the money on the bed and looked at Max with wide, openly frightened eyes.

"How did you-"

"Listen to me, because this is important," Max interjected, her hands reaching out to grab Rachel's shoulders. "This is what proves I am not a liar or mentally ill."

Rachel nodded blankly and pulled herself out of Max's grasp. Max did not seem at all bothered that Rachel was staring at her as though she was not sure who was mad: Max or Rachel.

"Tomorrow, at 5:23 am Pacific Standard Time, a magnitude 6.4 earthquake will strike, hitting Iran; it will spread across the whole of the East Azerbaijan Province," Max spoke slowly as though she needed Rachel to absorb every detail. "306 people will die in total. The rescue effort will get hampered for the first few days by local NGO's refusal of outside help. Once the final count comes in, you will know I am not from here. You will know that this is not some sort of hoax."

The madness of all this overwhelmed her; Rachel could not help but laugh and shake her head. It was all she could do to keep herself from losing her head.

"If you're not full of shit, and this happens at 5:23, I think that's all it'll take…” Rachel muttered aloud, her hand rubbing her face as she continued to struggle with processing all of this without fainting.

For the first time since blowing Rachel's mind, Max emitted a dim half smile as she examined Rachel's shocked state.

"Before I came here, I was told by a mutual interest that you were quick to believe in things," Max returned after a moment of silence they shared together.

Rachel snapped her head back up and stared intently at Max's unfailing gaze at her. Was Max referring to… to Chloe? God, what in the hell was all of this?

Rachel stood up and used her height to an advantage over Max. She stepped forward, hoping that Max took an unsteady back step. Max did not move an inch. She stood there, looking slightly up at Rachel their noses nearly touching as Caulfield remained locked in place.

"Let's say I believe you. Let's say you're right," Rachel started to breathe out to the unfailingly intense Max. "Max, when you came to you said….you said… you said…"

"I said, 'You're actually alive’ to you," Max took pity and finished for her inability to complete her sentence. "I was startled, and I'm sorry for scaring you like that."

"You're actually alive’ to you," Max took pity and finished for her inability to complete her sentence. "I was startled, and I'm sorry for scaring you like that."

"How did you-"
Fuming, Rachel shoved by her. She did not care it was tantamount to shoving a baby away. She did not care that Max's shaky legs gave way and she fell flat on her ass. Rachel instead twisted herself around and pushed her face right into Max's.

"Don't you dare fucking lie to me," she hissed at Max, the only reason she suppressed her urge to scream was thanks to Max's parents were still home. "Are you telling me you're from the future, and I'm... am I... have I..."

Once again, Rachel could not make herself finish this. The question she needed to know was far too painful to think about, let alone to ask it aloud. If Max was not lying... if Max really had (as absurd as it may have sounded) came from the future... Was she even still a part of that future?

Swallowing her malignant dread coursing through her brain, Rachel reached out and touched both of Max's cheeks. She was cold, and it was a pretty humid night.

"What happens?" she urgently demanded. "I need to know Max. If this isn't a fucking lie, and you're from the future. What in the fuck happens to me and why are you here?"

"There are so many variables to be telling to you specifics that I don't know if I can tell you; at least... not directly..." Max answered her finally, tilting her head. "You burned down an entire mountainside after you thought your father betrayed you. If I told you everything... I think... no. I know you will kill people."

Rachel stared at her, only faintly aware that Max had detailed another little fact Chloe swore on her father that she would never talk about to anyone else. Whatever had happened, whatever this was... this was for Max to detail; not her. It was not often she was in the position: at the complete mercy of another person. Not that she would have even considered any of this possible only an hour ago.

"I can help you, but we'll be taking a journey together... with an end result that hopefully will reduce as much... damage as possible," Max continued, her voice growing more and more strained. "For now, that will have to wait. I don't know how much longer I have to be here. I can feel her fighting back... worse than that has ever happened before..."

Rachel couldn't take it anymore, she cut across Max.

"Fighting back? What the fuck are you going on about?" Rachel snapped back viciously. "Where is she? Where is Max... the Max I know? Give her back!"

Furious at the cryptic bullshit she was being subjected to, Rachel gave Max one more hard shake before she noticed just how glazed her eyes were. They were stranger's eyes looking back at her. As another migraine wave washed over her with intensity, she had never had before. Rachel released her grasp and whimpered out. Her clutching her skull as though it would somehow numb this increasingly unbearable agony.

Max remained sitting there. She did not seem at all concerned by what was happening to Rachel.

"I perceive this reality differently than you do," Max said as she looked away from Rachel, who was now fallen back onto the edge of the bed. "It feels... more like a dream to me, and what you do and what you say and how you say it affects the delicate balance between the Max you know and the Max you see now."

As the pain eased a little, Rachel looked back to the Max sitting in front of her with nothing but hatred directed for her.
"As for this Max, that you know," Max said to Rachel, gesturing to herself, "she's… I guess the only way I can describe it is asleep. When she is asleep, she will not perceive what goes on between us, but when she is struggling to wake up as she is doing right now, she will remember bits and pieces of this. Like a dream, she can only faintly recall. It will be up to you to fill her in on the gap... or your version of the events. Because whether or like it or not, you and I are going to be seeing a lot of each other for a while... at least if you value you survival. For that to work, this body cannot fight me like she is now."

Max trailed off once again. Through her own pain, Rachel could see just how much it seemed like Max was struggling to remain in control of her very own body. With a small jerk, Max snapped her attention back to Rachel.

"... Sorry for that..." Max pressed on, pushing her hand against her face. "It is understandable why she fights, but you have to understand that it makes my thoughts... my feelings... uncoordinated. It is like trying to talk and think with someone trying to push you around and scream in your ear. The only way for us to continue this clearly is for you to convince her she needs to be passive. She needs to be actively collaborating between the three of us for this... invasion to work."

"Continue?" Rachel said as she leaned forward, her mouth agape as she stared into Max's foreign looking eyes "You... you can come and go at will?"

Still sitting on the floor, Max rolled her shoulder back in a small shrug.

"Yes and no," she replied. Closing her eyes and exhaling, "My abilities have reached a point where this sort of travel... This is not my first journey back to this point in time. It's hard on me physically, but it's as easy to do at a snap of a finger. I cannot root around in other realities so obtusely. I did it once... to nearly disastrous consequences. Finally, I cannot just take over Max you know at will. There has to be a catalyst. A catalyst you must provide, one you will provide me if you have any sense."

All of this was absurd, the work of fiction. Max was talking about time travelling or some sort of delusional bullshit; but the way Max spoke, with so much fervent conviction... it made it harder and harder for Rachel to deny what was sitting in front of her. She needed all of this to be a lie, a bad dream she could wake up from and laugh off.

However, it was not a dream. She was not about to be afforded such luck.

"How do I know you're not... I don't know... schizophrenic," Rachel desperately tried to hypothesize. "Look, I don't really know Max that well. How do I not know if this is all just a series of cosmic coincidences and you're just... sick in the head?"

Max merely flashed a ghost of a smile at her. Silently, she laid down flat on the floor.

"Keep my laptop on. You will find out if I am mentally ill at 5:23 am," she returned to Rachel as she closed her eyes. "When you confirm I'm not, take another selfie with her. Maybe hold up a sign signalling she is ready to accept me taking over her body. There is no rush, but... the sooner we reconnected... the sooner we can go about figuring out a way to keep you safe... and start preparing this Max for her destiny..."

As quickly as Max had stopped talking, Max's body jerked and her eyes flew up. She launched herself up and found herself staring at Rachel. The distance and cold age the Max that had been here only moments ago was gone. Replacing it was an expression of total fear and loss at what had happened.
This… this was the Max Rachel had come to know.

"What… what happened…" Max shakily asked as she looked at herself and the blood she was completely stained with. "Rachel, why am I… why am I covered in blood? Rachel… what happened me?!

Rachel had no real answers that could satisfy both of their needs.

"You fainted…" Rachel stupidly said to her.

Looking like she wanted to vomit, Max rubbed her head. She seemed to be in just as much physical pain as Rachel was.

"It… It was like… as though I was dreaming," Max softly explained, her voice shaky and lost. It was like she did not know if she was actually back or not. "I opened my eyes and I was standing there talking to you, but I couldn't use my body. I was moving without me moving. I was talking and… and I wasn't in control of what I said… I know I was saying things… but… it was like a dream again, I-I don't remember the exact words."

Max reached out, grabbing Rachel's biceps. Her eyes were wide and pleading. There was even an accusing undercurrent. It was as though she thought Rachel had done something to her. It appeared as though both of them were convinced the other had done something wicked.

"R-Rachel, you have to tell me what happened," Max's begging tone broke into a sob. "Please… what happened to me?"

There was no lie or deception in Max's expression. She looked as lost and frightened as Rachel felt. This was not a prank on Max's part. Whatever this was… it was real. This was real and it happened to both of them without provocation. Rachel reached out and pulled Max into a tight hug. She should feel her quivering against her in total terror.

Together, the two of them would have a long sleepless night waiting for 5:23 am.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. Especially after getting such a warm reception for this turn of events. This part was annoying to write. A transition into a new narrative is never friendly to a writer. Well, not for me at least.

Next up will be something lighter. Somewhere in Seattle, Chloe Price is on a date with Victoria!
The atmosphere at the art show was far louder than anything she had expected, but then again what would Chloe Price know of how an art show ought to have been like?

Pushing through the throngs of people as *Massive Attack* coloured her hearing, Chloe felt like nothing about the art made sense; it was edgy and incoherent to her. It was a strange sort of psychedelic and violently strange blend of Timothy Leary, brutalism and Nietzsche It all looked like fits of rage caught on canvas to her, created in a spur of the moment from the maker and hostess for tonight's affair, Madison Xu. To Chloe, it felt narcissistic to host a gallery and only show her own works. Yet once again, what the fuck would she know?

No one but Chloe seemed to mind it though, no one actually seemed to give enough of a shit to look at the macabre blacks and reds.. No, instead it was less like a showing and more like a gathering of Seattle's and the Pacific Northwest's most oddest characters for a social. They all seemed to be on drugs, which was fine, but they also took their hipsterism a little too far for her tastes. It all clashed with the higher end clientele Madison Xu had invited; the ones that came to socialize and connect much more formally - Victoria being one of them.

Speaking of which, Victoria had ditched her an hour ago for the most part. She checked up on Chloe, yes but she had her own things to do. It seemed as though she had many people to meet and greet on behalf of her notably absent parents. Yet, in spite of this large responsibility, it was so strange that Victoria seemed to be in her element completely. She even came across as charming, which for Chloe was a sight to fucking beheld in itself. To her – not that she would care to admit it – Victoria's live performance was certainly more impressive when the art Madison was displaying, even if it came at the expense of her date for the night.

Chloe did not mind the absence. She might have if she thought Victoria was pulling class out and using it against her, but she knew better than to treat Chloe like shit. They shared a common desire not to fuck things up with a mutual friend… even if Victoria was drooling all over that poor hipster.

As easy as it could be to blame Victoria, Chloe readily admitted to herself that she was not exactly the most sociable person right now. She did not even want to be here in the first place, let alone in a dress and having to listen to Victoria talk with people twice her age, like she too was an adult. Although, Chloe had to admit from what she heard from Victoria, it seemed like she was keeping up. Functions like this were not new to Victoria, obviously, so between this and the Chase name, which many of these patrons seemed to want to impress, so with that in mind, they seemed quite okay with pretending they were not conversing with a teenage girl.

The last place she wanted to be right now was at a party. Thoughts were eating away at her and she needed to talk to the one person she could confide anything to and know that her secrets would be kept safe.

It was too bad for her that Rachel was not answering her texts…

As Chloe lit up a cigarette, she glanced once more at her phone now resting on her lap. The silence was odd, as usually Rachel was quick on the uptake to send her girlfriend saucy messages and
updates without even asking to. However, for the past few hours she received nothing from her wife in words only. The silence was unnerving. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if everything was all right. She was not blind to the fact that her reunion with Max was eating into their time together. Rachel did not seem to mind it. In fact it felt like she encouraged it and with the sleepover with Max, she too was attempting to establish a bond together. If that was what was happening, that would be… so great to know they could all be friends.

Now… all she would have to do is find a way to make Victoria disappear...

Chloe gave her head a shake. That was… rude. She even felt a little guilty even thinking it. Victoria was just being… different, and Chloe did not know what to make of it. She was still figuring out if it was sincere or if she was going through the motions to keep her talons in Max. Whatever was happening, Chloe was still going to be weary of her intention. Max and Victoria… it felt like oil and water… so why exactly was it that Max was so head over heels for her?

Speaking of Max, she even had attempted to contact Max to get a hold of Rachel. Max - who was still tiptoeing on eggshells since their reunion - knew better than to avoid her calls, after what happened. After her phone went to voicemail and her texts unanswered, she gave up and brooded over the campaign she was being served in spite of her being underage... which she supposed was kind of cool.

As Chloe slumped down onto a marble bench, she idly smirked to herself and wondered if Max had sent her to bed early. Max did seem the type to be in bed before 10. Rachel would probably benefit from that. Perhaps she would go to Victoria and have her send messages. She doubted Max would ever miss a call from the Queen...

The only thing good she could dig from out of Victoria's forced date was that it had served well as a distraction to the growing guilt and self-directed anger she felt at her inability to pick up her phone and call Joyce.

She knew she was hurting Joyce that the only way she would be able to hear from Chloe was second hand from Sera or James. She knew that she was taking her hatred for Madsen out on her, and as much as she might have wanted to stop, she still could not; not even with all this time and space since Rachel and she fled the Bay. She felt awful for feeling like this; like she was wrong to the core of herself and she had no means to know how to just stop being like this.

So she delayed and delayed. She ignored every attempt Joyce made to reach out. She felt like such a hypocrite; roasting Max for doing what she was doing now to Joyce, and it hurt. It hurt in ways she had not thought. Yet in spite of this… this acknowledgement… she remained locked in this position, making contacting Joyce that much more painful, that much more unbearable when they inevitably returned to Arcadia Bay.

"That is the look of a person who is lost, and in more than just an art show sort of way."

Chloe looked up to the voice that spoke to her. She did not have to, not as the man slumped into marble bench next to her uninvited, a champagne flute delicate between his fingers. He did not look at her; his eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses were sharp and utterly focused on the art piece that she too had been staring at for a while now.

To Chloe, he seemed almost as bored as she was by all of this.

Remaining silent in the face of the man's question, Chloe directed her attention briefly to gaze for Victoria. It was an almost… instinctual thing these days. Ever since Eliot… she had no reason to trust strangers. Even if they were harmless. She needed to stay safe, and safe meant an escape route
to people who she knew.

…Even if that person was Victoria fucking Chase….

"Here to defend one of your own?" Chloe finally addressed the man next to her, her hands fidgeting as kept her eyes away from direct contact. "I didn't know your types were… fucking… unionized or something."

To his credit, the man was not completely up his own ass and dressed her down for talking shit. Instead the man merely laughed. It was not simpering or forced. In fact, it sounded completely genuine to her. This expression of honesty towards her in a sea of fake people was somewhat… assuring to hear. He did not seem far up his own ass, or look at her like she was some sort of peasant grasping to Victoria like a Human Remora (That was Taylor and Courtney's job after all).

It seemed that perhaps she was not the only sane one here tonight…that by itself was nice to find.

"Me, an artist?" he said as his own laughter faded somewhat into the background of his genial tone. "No… well, at least not in the Xu's definition of the craft. No, I'm a photographer. A whole other form of hipsterdom, but it's mine."

There was an obvious hint of pride in this, and it took Chloe's entire range of good manners not to roll her eyes at the man for puffing up as he did. There was a quality of Max in him, and that uncomfortably hit close to home.

Together in their renewed silence, the man exhaled and sipped his drink as Chloe breathed in a mouthful of smoke. Both of them stared unconsciously ahead at the painting pushing out into the real world with sculpturing work. If Chloe had to guess, it looked like Xu's interpretation of Hell to her: violently lonely.

"A moment of honesty: I don't like art shows," the man said as he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "They use their medium to lie and distort reality to their liking; and lies are… the embodiment of the worst trait humans have to offer. Photography is honest in all its stark earnestness, you get to see truth in its most savage form."

"Oh, so you're a different sort of pretentious," Chloe returned without thinking about it. She winced, but committed as she added. "Let me guess, you shoot in black and white on old equipment and use silly fucking titles to dramatize the fact you shot a picture of a … bird or something…"

The man did not look at her; at least he did not at first. She watched as the stubble on his face retracted as his smile once again returned to his face.

"Well, you're right on all accounts except for my equipment," the man murmured, his tone still light but the look in his eyes was unreadable. "I take it you have photographers as friends. I do not envy you."

The man fell silent as a couple thirty something women passed Chloe and the man. Both of them seemed to be down low trying to get his attention. He paid neither of them any attention, but it did not dissuade the women from giggling like teenagers as they walked away. The two of them would no doubt take another lap around the gallery to causally get a second glance at him.

Chloe rolled her eyes as the man next to her still pretended that had not happened. After another moment, he stood up from his seat and turned to Chloe.

"Come on," he said as he gestured her to follow him. "Let's get a drink before they come back to me
to whore myself out to their whims."

Squinting at the man, Chloe nodded and joined her new acquaintance. She could use another drink. Something to forget the deafening silence Rachel and Max were inflicting on her for no fucking reason at all.

"Are you, like, a big deal or something? Because that sure as hell wasn't for me…" Chloe guessed as she walked at his side and attempted to not laugh at the only person here that was somewhat friendly. "Are you internet famous? You seem like someone who uses Instagram far too much."

The man maintained his expression, he was not offended, nor was he overtly amused. He just kept up his focus.

"You know, you're really funny for someone who is playing up the saddest girl in the room cliché," he suddenly replied after a moment, subtly smirking as he watched his words catch her off guard. "You should really try to be that more often. Sullen is dull and does not build up any real character traits for you. Five minutes into talking to you and everyone will see how little there is to you."

As the two of them reached the drink table manned by several caterers, he set his empty champagne flute onto a tray with others and picked two fresh glasses up for them. He turned back to the now embarrassed Chloe, and extended a glass out to her which she took.

The man lifted his glass towards and Chloe took the hint, clinking it against his gently.

"As for me… I am just another photographer pretending to not be aging and struggling to maintain some foothold in this brave new millennial world of yours," he said self-deprecatingly as he sipped his new drink. "My name is Mark Jefferson. It is a pleasure to meet you…"

The man named Mark Jefferson extended his hand out in front of hers. Hesitating for a moment, Chloe nodded and reached out, taking the hand Jefferson had offered to her. She shook it briefly, deciding to keep a much more enthusiastic greeting to herself.

"Chloe…" she introduced herself to Jefferson letting go of his hand as she felt a strange wave of defensiveness wash over her even though Jefferson had done nothing to provoke it. She had not felt a vibe like this one in years. Not since…

Chloe pulled herself out of that train of thought. She examined the man. He seemingly genuinely unbothered by her defensive posturing as he reached over the table to retrieve a small Ahi Tuna entrée. Jefferson looked a little bemused, but Chloe's resistance had not dissuaded him.

"No last name?" He teased her lightly. "Very intriguing, Miss Chloe; it's still not a substitute to a personality though, but you're in the right direction…"

Sipping her Champagne, Chloe clutched the stem tightly as she rolled her eyes at his barb. Honestly, she probably deserved that one… She had not exactly gone easy on him.

"Sorry, I don't give last names out to strangers…" she mumbled as she shifted her weight to her right leg.

Nibbling on his entrée, Jefferson swallowed as he casted a very curious examination of the teenage girl he was attempting to coerce a proper name. Jefferson tilted his head and looked at her in a way not unlike that of Rachel: like he was attempting to figure out the puzzle in front of him.

"You know, I realize that this probably your first non-high school gathering. I get you are more accustomed to parties where the only thing you have to do is drink cheap flavoured liquor with
soda chaser in the shortest time possible so you can get nice and drunk as fast as you can before mommy and daddy catches you. I also I get that you are used to doing this in the company of your high school clique, who you believe up and down you'll be best friends for the rest of your life with…” he went off, his voice growing steadily more… entrancing as he stepped closer to her. "However, out here in the real world, sometimes you go to social outings with perfect strangers; and sometimes it's not unreasonable to have to interact with other people to form new bonds."

Jefferson paused, and with his free hand, he cusped Chloe's shoulder. He used his height to full effect. Chloe glanced around the gallery and noticed Victoria. She was chatting with a couple of women and for a moment, she caught Chloe's eye. There was a strange flash of envy in her face, but she looked away and returned to her conversation.

"It's an exercise in trust, and an act of growing as a person," he continued. "Something we all have to do eventually… even you, Miss Chloe…?"

Deciding enough was enough, and that he was not going to stop. Chloe batted the hand from her shoulder and stepped back. Jefferson still looked like the cat that ate the canary. She stared silently at him for a little longer before she sighed.

"Chloe… Chloe Price…" she finally muttered to him, granting him this small victory. "You know… you're also funny for a guy trying to hide his forehead creases."

As Jefferson drank, Chloe lit up a new cigarette and attempted to gather her nerves once again. She did not want to think about what this was feeling like. The last time she found herself placed in this sort of uncomfortable position, someone fucking died.

Being here… it was wrong. She should have told Victoria to fuck off or something…

Through the plume of smoke, she glanced up and saw that Jefferson seemed to understand what sort of position he had placed her. He looked awkward and a little apologetic for what he done to force an answer out. Chloe did not know if it was genuine or not, nor did she care.

"I am sorry, if I made you uncomfortable," Jefferson apologized to her faintly as he took a drink. "But…since this is your first little get together, I will go easy and say that keeping personal details is good policy to have. You never know who you can trust these days."

The silence between the two of them was thick and filled with an unaddressed tension. Jefferson turned away and directed the attention to the nearest art piece which Chloe had not one fucking clue where to start with. She downed her drink and stood next to him, her focus straight ahead as a strange idea was crossing into her head. A reason why it was that Jefferson seemed all too willing to put up with her roadblocks.

"I'm not…" she started, still not acknowledging the man next to her. "I'm not single, and I'm not into your… gender, by the way."

Next to her, Jefferson chuckled at her words, like something she had suggested had been funny.

"Nice pun," he wryly returned, his head tilted as he grinned widely.

It took a moment of reviewing what she had said to pick it up, and when she did Chloe could not help but laugh lightly as well.

"Well, as much as I would hate to shatter your faux industrial punk girl ego and vanity, but you're not my type even if you were interested," Jefferson remarked dryly. He shook his head with a huff as he added. "Why does everything have to boil down to primal instincts these days? Why can't I
just stand here and talk? Learn about someone new who wandered off the street and into my sphere?"

"Because she's clever enough to not fall for your lines, Mark…" a voice addressed the man. "Besides, didn't you come here to hit on me?"

Standing there was Madison Xu, in all her dark, icy girl glory. She stepped forward… or rather drunkenly swayed to the two of them and caught Jefferson in a tight grasp around his waist. Jefferson did not seem particularly pleased, but he forced his confusion into an expression of warmth for the woman now nibbling on his neck.

"Okay… so maybe you're right…" Jefferson managed to get out. As he winced from a hard bite on his neck, he turned to Chloe and added. "Debauchery hour has begun. It was… genuinely nice meeting you, Miss Price. Thank you for letting me bother you."

Looking at the two of them with raised eyebrows, Chloe nodded at Jefferson with as good a smile as she could produce for him. She was a little glad that Xu was taking him off her hands.

"Chloe, can I offer you a word of advice?" Jefferson said casually as he pulled away from Xu to turn his head back to her.

Chloe looked at Jefferson for a moment as she tried to ignore Victoria walking towards her. She nodded to him.

"Don't let yourself be entrapped as the sad girl," he recommended as he pushed his one side in an attempt to get Xu off him long enough to focus. "Live, enjoy yourself. Take yourself too seriously and you'll end up dead before you ever learned to live in the first place…"

With one final smile, Jefferson allowed the host to drag him off, leaving Chloe alone for only a few seconds until Victoria finally joined her after hours of leaving her on her own. It was strange to see the usually well-controlled Victoria look so completely stunned. Her eyes were bulging as she gave Chloe a reappraising look.

"You know who that was, right?" Victoria said breathlessly as she turned away to watch as Madison depart with Jefferson.

Chloe idly shrugged.

"Mark Jefferson apparently," Chloe shrugged, as she turned away. "Some Dad-tiered hipster bro, I guess. Whatever, like I fucking care or anything."

That description of a man Chloe assumed to be some sort of idol or hero of Victoria. It did not go over well with Chase. She stood there silently, her arms crossed over her chest as she looked like she was sucking on a lemon. That was usually Victoria's default expression for Chloe, so it was not entirely out of character or anything.

"I should have fucking figured you would not know greatness even if it hit you in the face," Victoria bemoaned, her hand pressing against her forehead, as though Chloe had done something stupid. "We're going to get out of here, and hang out on the roof... you're coming."

Taking away any illusion of free choice, Victoria grabbed Chloe by the hand and silently dragged her away towards the roof exit of the gallery. She could not hide her grin at just how pissed Victoria was from losing her opportunity to mingle with a hero of hers to some poor girl from Arcadia Bay.
Chapter End Notes

As always, sorry for the delay. I started writing then decided to go up things a little. It took a while to get a feel for Jefferson, my bad.

Next you'll get the chapter you probably expected.
The mood of her guest improved somewhat after leaving the more formal party of the party.

Checking her phone to see it reading nearly five in the morning, Victoria sighed as she watched Price doing shot for shots with a couple of party attendees who had broken off from the party with them. She laughed and mingled, but it was probably the influx of hard liquor loosening her out of her tension.

Shaking her head, Victoria placed her lips back around the bong mouthpiece and flicked the lighter flame over the bowl full of northern grown BC Bud. Breathing in the smoke, she passed it on to some art girl waiting her turn and stood up, a rush of blood to her head left her dizzy and staggering for a moment as she shakily reached for her cigarettes. Silently, she took measured steps towards her date for the night.

While she might have seemed like she was getting back into the swing of it, there was still something bothering Price. A shadow that seemed to be lingering over her since they all met at Max's house for the reunion. Price should have learned a lot from her girlfriend; such as the art of being fake; but she could not fake it, no matter how often she smiled and pretended like things were all okay while she was in the company of Rachel and Maxine.

Initially, Victoria had figured it was exhaustion from the compounding of Rachel's shit. There was, however, more to it.

Rachel was a free spirit, yes, but she was a free spirit with broken wings. No matter how much she faked it, no matter how many smiles and power plays and parties she threw Rachel was never the same after what happened to her mother. With Price being her confidant, best friend and lover it meant Price was dealing with the grief of three. Rachel's, Price's for witnessing the death of Rose and her own father and the aftermath of that in her family. A person at any age would probably be in a totally fucked up position where she would have to place one loss above the other, and for Rachel's sake, it appeared that pushing aside her own loss and her own feelings of guilt aside to protect Rachel.

Although she thought it was unhealthy, there was no way to deny the face that she thought it was… admirable. Victoria did not like to envy others (Price most especially), but that ability to just… prioritize pain was impressive.

Although… Victoria would shell out for actual therapy if she was related to them. If Rachel's father was not providing that, then he had better have soon.

Laughter poured from the competitive drinking as Victoria approached and Price flew back her head bobbing to the noise coming from her ear buds. Her dress was crumpled and reeked of alcohol. Victoria tried her best not to wrinkle her nose at Price's dishevelled appearance. She should have expected this to happen. Chloe Price and nice clothing went as well as oil and water.

She did not notice Victoria until a hand belonging to Victoria had grabbed her shoulder. Like an
electric shock, Price bounced forward and shoved Victoria as hard as she could. Victoria silently
took in the strange expression which her date had. She looked… a little scared. It only lasted for a
moment before it vanished and Price's expression of narcissistic disinterest with everything that she
had been invited to.

At least Price popped out the ear buds and acknowledged her. Usually that was not the case.

"Having fun, Vicky?" Price asked her, that infuriatingly sly smile forming on her face. "I know
that I'm no Maxine, but you seem to be doing alright without her."

Victoria clenched her mouth shut to avoid the insult brewing on the tip of her tongue. It was not
that Price had said something particularly insulting. It was just instinctual at this point. For years,
they had been chipping away at each other, so to be like this. Being thrust right into the
uncomfortable position of having a mutual connection from Maxine… these were hard habits to
break.

Across from her, she noticed Price seemed to be enduring a very familiar thought process as she
was. Price sighed and surprised Victoria with a heavy arm falling down around her shoulder. She
did even take the hint as Victoria stiffened uncomfortable by the sudden unilateral invasion of her
personal space. Muttering drunkenly at herself, Price put her cigarette back between her lips so that
she would have a free hand to hike up the side of her dress.

"What… the fuck… are you doing…" Victoria spoke as she silently watched in horror. She looked
around to see if anyone was watching Price's display of exhibitionism.

"I wouldn't be doing this if you fucking let me wear some pants," Price snapped right back as her
hand dipped into side of her purple boy shorts and removed a small baggie containing four pills.

"Courtesy of Rachel and I…" Price said, extending the baggie to her inside the palm of her hand.
"You wanted to do some mollies, well here… it's not cut with anything either. I tried them out and
everything. It made me feel like a douchebag, but I guess that won't change much for you."

Victoria looked at the mollies in Price's hands. What happened in June… she was not about to
forget that so quickly. She did not want to feel that helpless, she did not want to experience that
lack of control ever again. If she was going to do drugs like that, it would be on her fucking terms.

"I would rather be a douchebag than a poser," Victoria muttered as she pulled herself out of Price's
grasp. "I… I'm not in the mood for your crotch ecstasy… maybe… maybe some other time."

She glanced back at Price, who looked at her as if she was a wimp. She was not, she just wasn't
going to let fucking Chloe Price dictate to her what she should put in her body.

"Besides… I'm already pretty stoned, and I have to meet Maxine tomorrow," Victoria admitted as
crossed her arms over her chest and looked away from Price's inquisitive eyes. "I have to let her
know that Chloe Price met the famous Mark Jefferson and blew him off... It could be good for a
laugh."

There was no snappy comeback, no insult lobbed back at Victoria. This was their favourite game
together; this was something Price lived for. Victoria rounded back to Price to see if she was even
there. She was there all right, but the expression was curiously pensive; there was a curious smile
on Price's mouth which did not meet her eyes. It seemed as though getting this blind drunk made
her much more... reflective.

This was like looking at Rachel Amber as she played her little games. It was pretty fucking
unnerving.

"What?" Victoria snapped defensively, hoping to break the uncomfortable stare. At this point she preferred the fight to this.

Price shook her head and shrugged.

"Nothing…" she answered as she continued to look at Victoria with a passive intensity.

Nevertheless, there was something on the tip of her tongue. It was not an insult, it was a question, and Victoria knew it. She knew because Price had no filter. Nothing ever was held back if it was not about her. Nothing even attempting to broach the topic of her personal life was for anyone outside her girlfriend. So why now was it that she hesitated?

"You don't think Max and you are moving too fast?" Price blurted out to her. "I mean… you know each other for a couple weeks and you're already… whatever you are."

Victoria blinked as the question Chloe Price had asked permeated into her consciousness. This was what she needed to know? If Maxine was replacing her or something? What in the fuck was going on in her head? Who did Price think she was all of a sudden… Max's dad, mom, or whatever? She had enough problems juggling Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield.

Victoria exhaled loudly out her nose as she eyed Price and her stupid stare. It seemed as though Price thought she was entitled to an answer. If that was the case, then fine. She would give her an answer.

"Price you got expelled to keep Rachel from losing the lead in some stupid play," Victoria reminded her, her voice biting as she glared at the older girl. "You knew each other for… what… a day? There you were being kicked out of school, jeopardizing your future to protect little miss popularity's honour; So you have no fucking business to tell me what is too fast!"

That penetrate past the Price defenses in a way Victoria never expected. Price stood there, gaping stupidly as seemed to struggle to find some way to justify what happened all those years ago. Silently, Victoria stood there, her arms still crossed. It was so fucking typical that she could not even relish in this major dent in Price's attempt to intimidate her. She was trying to be a little better. These days, she had a reason to be better than what she was.

"Fine…" Price said as she looked somewhat humbled and relaxed her stance. "I guess you're right. I cannot talk about speed then… but I can still talk about how shit you are to others. For example: how you attack Rachel for no reason beyond fucking petty shit."

Victoria felt her eye twitch. Yes… yes, Price could talk about that. Once again, that old familiar feeling of guilt induced nausea wash back over her. She got it whenever she had to be someone she did not necessarily want to be, but felt she had no other options.

The guilt which had been building up over the years she spent sniping Price and Amber over everything and at every opportunity. It might not have been overt as it had been in the early days, but the peace not as peaceful as the three of them pretended it was. Worse still, was that it was mostly one-sided. Price, of course, would bite back in a chivalrous way to protect Amber's honor, but it was rare that Rachel would. She seemed so far… removed with everything.

"There have been bad moments between Rachel and I, sure…” Victoria stiffly admitted, as the tables seemed to turn on her. "But I haven't gone out of the way to hurt her in a while."
Victoria expected to see Price re-situate herself into something combative. Instead, she took a final drag of her cigarette.

"No, not recently, but you did and what gets said, doesn't just miraculously fucking vanish," Price replied relatively even toned for the topic at hand as she dropped her cigarette. "But… I can't shake the feeling that if Rachel's Mom hadn't died, you would have continued on treating us like shit just to make yourself feel better… am I right?"

Chloe Price's almost serene, possibly alcohol induced casualness was so much more unnerving than any of her anger. Victoria knew all about Price's rage, knew how to counter it pretty effectively as well. However, this was so much different.

Victoria did not answer the question; probably because she feared verbalizing the answer above all else. Yes… if Rose had not died, it seemed so much more likely that the relationship between the three of them would be so much crueler than the simmering tension they were living. Rachel never felt human to her, and it took the death of someone close to her for Victoria to finally see what it was Price saw in her. It felt so fucking awful to think about, but that was her genuine opinions on Amber. Price saw it and fucking knew what she was. No wonder things had never progressed beyond antipathy for her.

*Jesus Christ*… it was little wonder why she thought she had to protect Maxine from her…

"You have a growing hand over the Vortex club; so what about them?" Price pressed on as she stepped closer. "Do they know the real you? I know that a lot of them talk shit about me behind my back 'turbo dyke' 'Rachel's poor girl experience'. I know all that shit, and I know all of it stems back to you. You might not say it out loud, but you created an environment to make it okay for your little minions to act like that."

Victoria was wordless, she could not even meet Chloe's eye. What was especially hard was noticing just how much vulnerability she was willing to show her. Admitting to Victoria that the Vortex Club's growing pressure on the couple was not something she was quick to confess to. Victoria did not think that the two of them even cared about what they were saying. Hurtful as it was, Price and Amber always seemed to have a way to let it slide off them.

Perhaps that was not really the case…

"I'm going to be shuttling Max to Arcadia Bay whenever I can, and it's inevitable she'll want to hang out with you," Price pressed on, her voice stiffening as she seemed to want Victoria to pay attention. "The problem is, the Victoria that you are here in Seattle is fucking nothing like the Victoria you are at school."

Price… no… Chloe was right. She hated to admit it… but Price was right. Everything about this summer she had shared together with Max. Fuck, just the simple act of meeting someone who just… clicked. For her, it had felt so magical, rare… and so fleeting. It would not be long before the two of them had to return to reality. With Chloe and Rachel now in her life, it was all but assured they would see each other in Blackwell.

She wondered if she could be the Victoria Chase whom Maxine knew this summer? The one who was willing to get challenged… willing to be vulnerable, willing to be pushed out of her comfort zone by a beautiful heart who actually gave a shit about getting to know her.

Or would she be the Victoria that would burn all things that made her look weak…

"You need to sort out your fucking shit, and explain to your friends what you really are to them,"
Chloe spoke up, interrupting Victoria's thoughts, her voice growing louder and louder. "Max is… Max is clearly head over heels for you, and if you pull some shit on her… if you fucking **hurt** her…"

Victoria nodded urgently. She did not know why, but she felt she needed Chloe to be reassured about her intentions. They were not family, but there was still something to be said about a friendship as close as Max and Chloe's. She would… she would **try** not to hurt her. She was not a future seer… but she would try at the very least.

"I won't hurt her, Chloe," she nervously promised the angry punk girl stuck in a dress. "Look, think what you will about me. You have every reason to hate me. But I care about Maxine. She's… special."

Chloe stared at Victoria for a moment or two. She seemed to be searching for a failure in resolve.

"You fucking better not. Max Caulfield means too much to me to let you," Chloe muttered mutinously. "I will beat the fuck out of you in front of all your stupid preppy friends if you fucking do her wrong."

Giving Victoria a final jab in the chest with her finger, Chloe dropped her hand and walked away. Probably to find herself another drink to drown the conservation she took part in, which suited Victoria fine. She sighed and backed off in the opposite direction and pulled her phone from her purse. She moved just in case Price decided she wanted to immediately go right into round two.

Honestly, that had gone a little better then she expected it to go. Price it seemed was more than justified to act out by the sounds of it. Perhaps she would talk to Taylor about it. Taylor seemed to be on relatively good terms with Rachel and Price in comparison to other many other Vortex Club members. Perhaps she could get to the source of the problem there faster than she could.

**Breaking News: 6.4 Earthquake in Northwest Iran, hundreds feared dead**-

Victoria ignored the breaking news alert and went to check her messages in the off chance to see if Maxine had called. Doubtful though, Max and Rachel were probably asleep. After a moment of waiting as though Maxine might read her mind, Victoria exhaled and texted home to see if Mom or Dad was awake to pick them up or send a car for them.

Judging from Chloe's inebriation alone, it was about time for the two of them to head for bed as well.

Chapter End Notes

Oh wow two chapters in a month. Lol. Happy Halloween.
Staring at the image of Rachel and Chloe on her screen with Rachel Calling flashing over it, Sera could not help but smile in spite of her growing weariness as thoughts of sleeping after her shift grew more and more tempting. She really should have gotten her licence one of these days. Still, a call from Rachel always managed to refocus her exhaustion back into a state of warm attentiveness. It was a little odd she was calling and not using FaceTime like Rachel usually did, but she would take it.

It was not as though Rachel had gone dark on her since they left Arcadia Bay. If anything they spoke even more. Usually it came in the form of texts or Facebook messages with pictures being swapped between the two of them. Sera was slowly but surely decoding the meanings to whatever was really on her daughter's mind, which slipped away from James and a lot of other people. She supposed she had some personal experience in it. Sometimes Rachel was like a mirror of James; sometimes it was looking at herself.

Sera came to a standstill on the sidewalk and smiled to Mrs Cornell and her little Pomeranian on a morning. She was an older woman who she never spoke to but did somewhat know each other. The woman sort of scowled and continued to walk her dog. In other words, this was a usual interaction.

There were some… obvious reasons why she was not liked; and it was not something she wanted to think too hard on right this moment. Not as she accepted the call and pressed her phone against her ear.

"Hello Mom? Can you talk?" she heard Rachel's voice on the other end.

The sound of it brought a wave of motherly concern over Sera. Rachel sounded tired and not in the tired hangover sort of way she was used to when she got these early morning calls. She sounded strained, hoarse. It sounded like she had spent the entire night crying.

"Rachel?" Sera found her own voice and spoke softly to her daughter. "Rachel, what's the matter?"

There was no immediate answer from Rachel. That was all it took for Sera to feel a sense of dread overtake her. Still, she refused to give it a voice. That sort of dread was one major part of that old familiar feeling she fought against every day. Sera closed her eyes and paced away towards the front steps of the house she was within spitting range of.

"Sweetheart…" Sera spoke carefully, hoping her hunch was wrong. "Rachel… did you have a fight with Chloe or something?"

Rachel did not even pause to consider what she said.

"No… not at all," Rachel denied. She probably would have been angry if she had slept properly. "I'm just… I'm at my friend's Max's house... or in some sort of fort or something in the backyard. Chloe is hanging out with Victoria Chase... we leave Arcadia Bay and here she fucking is, friends with Max of all people…"

Sera frowned at the slur in her daughter's voice and her forgetfulness. Victoria Chase's appearance...
in Seattle was old news at this point. Rachel routinely called from the Chase home before she turned in. On more than one occasion, Rachel might have gone out of her way to snatch a baby Victoria Chase photo or two and send it her way. They were too adorable to not share.

"I know, you told me," Sera reminded her, hiding the concern for her daughter's lapse. "I think Victoria is nicer than she plays off. Call it a dream, but I think that Chloe and she could complement each other… if they put in the work."

There was a small fragile laugh on the other end of the line.

"They aren't making it easy," Rachel murmured almost under her breath. "I just… I guess I finally got that homesickness they talk about. I just… I really just miss you… and Dad… and Mom a lot. I really needed to hear your voice; and Dad too… but I don't want him to worry about me…"

There it was again. It was those little familiar reminders Sera felt as she watched a daughter treading a mother's path in a strange, almost predestined sort of way; but there were differences in the pattern. She thanked God Rachel had a support network which she lacked. James, Chloe… Rose. They were powerful motivators to help Rachel along this difficult road.

"I completely understand your feelings… I had them as well when I left home with James at your age," Sera admitted to Rachel, as she shoved that memory aside. "I wish… I wish that I were as brave as you to voice them to those I loved and left behind. I… did not know how to express anything real to others. The fact you are telling me this now… I am so proud of you."

"I love you so much, Sera…" Rachel spoke finally, her nose sniffling on the other end of the line. "Can you just… just… tell me about your shift or something normal, or how you and Dad are doing? Could you please stay on the line with me for a little while?"

Looking at the Amber home, she stood in front of and with her on and off again man in her life who was no doubt waiting for her. Sera smiled and nodded as she took a seat on the steps and repositioned her phone. If she could help Rachel in her own small way, then she would do so.

Besides, it would give her a moment to figure out the best way to get to Seattle in the shortest time possible…

"Of course," Sera agreed to her daughter's request. "Where do you wish to start?"

"…"

…

As Rachel disconnected the call, she wiped the crust of her eyeliner from underneath her eyelids. Even hearing her mom's voice had done little to erase what she bore witness to last night. She wanted it all to be a sick joke Max was playing on her. She wanted to be cross at Max for making her believe that she had somehow gained the ability to time travel or whatever the fuck it was that she was claiming she could do.

As much as she wanted to delude herself… she just knew that it was not made up. Not as she watched the news in horror as an earthquake hit Iran just as this Max had predicted. The details were unimportant, what mattered was that it happened exactly when she said it would happen. She wanted to doubt it, she wanted to believe it was just a fever dream or something … but that was long since impossible now.

Worse still was the implication that she was left with from this other Max. That… that she…
Rachel put her hands behind her head and bowed. It was all too fucking horrible to think about. She did not want to believe what this other Max had implied. If this was not some cosmic trick meant to solely to play mind tricks on her, then there had to be a reason why it was this happened; had this Max come back to warn her or something?

If that was the case, if that what was happening, the elephant in the room was finding a way to convince Max Caulfield to endanger herself for Rachel's benefit. How in the f**k could she ever justify it? She could probably talk Max into doing it. She could live up to her reputation as a talented manipulator and prove Victoria Chase's original hypothesizes of her right finally. The question then became how she could live with herself if it meant harming another. Would she be even debating this if it were a time travelling Chloe?

Moreover, if worse came to worse, if Max was permanently injured by this… What could she possibly tell Chloe about this? A single jump left Max bleeding and in nearly catatonic for hours. The very idea that this could happen almost at will from the body invader was mind numbing to contemplate. Poor Max… she seemed utterly desperate to stay awake all night, clinging onto Rachel as though Rachel might have been able to protect from what had happened.

As Rachel looked up briefly to see the slider doors to Max's home open and the girl in question step out and make her tentative approach, she found it was increasingly hard to feel not guilty when Max trusted a friend who was increasingly desperate for this to happen once again to her…

"Hey…" Max rasped, sounding as though they spent their separation crying. "I… I was looking for you…"

Rachel looked up to acknowledge Max Caulfield and the shaky voice that had called out to her as she drew closer to her. Max physically looked how Rachel felt. Whatever that had happened to her was still draining even nearly half a day later. There was a stagger in her step and she appeared to be dazed.

"I'm sorry that I ran off… I just needed some space," Rachel explained away as she flashed Max her phone and added. "…I… had to call people to hear their voices… I'm sure that Chloe has told you how melodramatic I am."

A worn out smile appeared miraculously on Max's mouth as she took a seat onto the step below Rachel. Unconsciously, Rachel pushed herself to one side. Partly to give Max some space, partly out of fear that whoever who was inside of Max had not entirely vacated just yet.

If Max was bothered by the fear, then she did not show it. Instead, she looked around at the weathered wood play fort they were sitting on. That worn expression of guilt bubbled back to the surface like a disease in waiting. Max pushed her hand through her bangs and leaned her head against the wooding railings.

"Dad built this the summer we got here. I think he thought I was younger than I actually was," she murmured as she looked around the small fort. "I don't think he meant to build this to bribe me or anything after our departure from Arcadia Bay, but… I can't help that it feels like it now."

Rachel remained silent, she did not voice the encounter Chloe and she had with Ryan the other day. It was not the time to tell her just how desperate her father was to provide her with a new life.

"I guess we thought Chloe would be in this house all the time, which means it's all on me," Max said, her soft tone tinged with bitter self-directed anger. "Now that I think about it she was fourteen… I can't think of anyone who would play on one at that age…"
"Chloe for one," Rachel said as she stood up to lean on the opposite railing. "I can't tell you how many times we've been out where Chloe just has to go on the swings. She's not as cool and mature as she pretends to be. She'd love this."

As Rachel pulled her cigarettes out, she looked to Max, asking for a silent permission to smoke. Max glanced back at the house for a moment before she nodded curtly, and that was all it took for Rachel to brighten a little.

"Rachel, I'm really glad that you were there for her," Max quietly spoke up to the blonde. "I wasn't a good friend to her… not like you have been."

Rachel could not help but shake her head. That sort of envy-tinged praise Max offered was not something she deserved at all. God, she wished she were there for Chloe better than she had been. These fucking mitigating circumstances… there had to be a way to cope…

"I was there for her at the beginning," she murmured back to Max. "She's been the one taking care of me, she's not in a place to be doing that, and yet she has without complaint. Everything is so fucking fucked up right now. Home… here…"

As she trailed off, she took a drag from her smoldering cigarette. Rachel opened her photo gallery and dropped her phone in Max's lap. Max looked confused as she stared down at photo of the gently smiling Sera. Rachel closed her eyes. It was time for Max to understand a few things.

"Sera is not just a friend, she's my biological mother, Max," Rachel informed Max as she struggled to maintain her composure. "She wasn't… well, for a great number of years... most of my life, really. She came into my life at almost the same time Chloe did. It took a long time, but she got clean. Dad and Sera started talking again… not because he wanted to. Chloe and I sorta forced their hands. It was… fuck, it was so weird back then, but it has gotten so much better. It wasn't always the case… but I love her like a mother now."

Giving the dead silent Max a moment to swallow the information, Rachel leaned down and scrolled the screen to the next image. It was Mom in all soft glory. Her soft complexion would never age beyond this point. There was nothing left of her but the memories.

"This is my mother in all ways but blood, Rose," Rachel introduced with a small smile for the woman in the picture, as if the image of Rose was aware of Rachel looking over her. "She met Dad when I was young. They fell in love with each other hard. She took on me without seconds to hesitate… at least that is what my Dad says, and I don't know how much I can trust him."

She fell silent as she was about to open a can of worms that did not need to be opened yet. She reached down; invading Max's personal space to touch Mom's smiling face. She would give anything to see that smile one more time.

"What I know is that she was the bravest woman I ever knew… taking a chance on me like she did… unbelievable…" Rachel said as she pulled her fingers away from the screen.

"A month or so after I met Chloe, there was an incident…” she said slowly to Max. "What happened… that is more something you should to talk to Chloe about… but what you need to know right now, is that I am melodramatic and I act out sometimes, and usually I get lucky. This time, luck ran out… My Mom paid for it with her life."

Sighing, Rachel rubbed her face with her hand and allowed her senses to overtaken by the cigarette
smoke. She could not look down at Max's expression forming into a visage of horror.

"I've been to therapy, take prescriptions, or at least I say I do, I'm constantly told it's not my fault from everyone who gives a fuck about me," she listed off to the silent brunette at her feet. "But it's all a sugar-coated lie. It is my fault that she died, I didn't think and she died. It's that simple.

Rachel opened her eyes and glanced at Max. It was just as she expected. All of this seemed to compound upon the strain she was already facing. The burden of honesty was a bitch sometimes. It was these moments that she found herself sympathizing with her father's decisions in the past.

"Rachel..." Max started up, her eyes wide and misty. "I... I didn't... I didn't know..."

Rachel shook her head as she tapped her cigarette. She did not want any more sympathy. It was just something that needed to be said.

"No, Max... please, don't say anything... I just wanted to get it out there. Cards on the table; because you and I have something bigger than this," Rachel pointedly interjected. "I can't... afford to act up who I am to you anymore. I want you to know the real me; and the real me is scared, and I live with this insurmountable pile of shit and now we have a version of you jumping back in time to... to-

Max launched herself up from her seat and gripped Rachel's free hands. Her eyes were wide in spite of her exhaustion.

"What happened last night... that wasn't me, Rachel," I know I've been telling you this way too often... but it wasn't me, I promise!"

Rachel nodded and forced herself to smile to reassure Max. This was not the menacing version of Max who came here with years of knowledge and stunted from doing or saying anything concrete because her Maxie had fought back against her with everything she had. It was impressively, but there was still so much more that she needed to know...

... and here she was... preparing to talk Max into hurting herself again for her benefit. This was all so incredibly fucked up right now.

"I believe you, Maxie. I really do believe you," Rachel reassured her friend as she tightened her grip on Max's hand. "Whatever happened... what you became... it was not you. I have not known you for very long, but it felt like talking to a stranger. You might think you were hapless, but you fought so hard enough to scare her away. That was all you."

"You need to tell me what I said, Rachel," Max said as she narrowed her eyes. "I can't remember anything. Whatever I said... whatever she said... I need to know. I can't go on with this blank spot. Please... please will you tell me?"

Yet in spite of the plea Max offered, in spite of the sheer desperation in her voice Rachel still shook her head. She knew it hurt Max, but she just... she just couldn't. She couldn't verbalize it to Max... It would make it real. It would be out there and there would be no more denying it.

"It doesn't matter what you said-" she tried to deflect.

"You said you were in this together, and that means you do not get to bullshit me!" Max snapped in a strained tone at Rachel.

Rachel stared at her new friend for a moment. Her eyes lingered on her as she took another drag. She decided against saying just how much Max resembled Victoria Chase right now. The only
thing missing was her arms crossed and her foot tapping.

Max's arms suddenly crossed… okay… she was halfway to Victoria now. Rachel exhaled and silently wished this day had never happened.

"She told me that she can jump at will," Rachel informed Max, who was waiting for more than what Rachel wanted to offer. "The only thing she needs is a photograph of us together with expressed permission from both of us together, like we took last night. Wherever you went to, it had a physical effect on her. You made it hard to think. The two of you have to get along for her to do whatever she needs to do… whatever the fuck that means."

What she said, telling how to summon this other Max… it was not what Max Caulfield actually wanted to know. She stood there, demanding an answer. Rachel had to put her fear to words for Max. There was no more hiding from it.

"She said I'm going to die soon…" Rachel said as she summoned her courage to say the truth to her friend. "She didn't say it outright, and she didn't say when. She inferred it… and I'm betting it's not a natural way either."

The truth of what was touched upon last night was now out for Max to digest. She may have been maintaining her eyes on Rachel, but she looked like she was staring at a ghost. Perhaps she would not be far off from the truth soon enough. Rachel emitted a small nod, as though she was confirming it.

Max then said something that Rachel had not expected to hear from her.

"Then you need her back, Rachel," Max stated with a finality that startled Rachel for a moment. "We need her back."

"I'm not going to tell you what to do with your body. God knows how much that sort of… thing has hurt you. You lost a lot of blood doing it," Rachel said as she shook her head. "She gave me the warning, and I got a rough idea of a time frame and place… perhaps that's enough."

It was not enough.

"You need more than a gut feeling. If your life is on the line, then you need the full truth!" Max hissed up at her, her eyes wide at Rachel.

Rachel bit her lip and tapped her cigarette out on the rail. A trickling of shame returned to her thoughts. She did it. She was being what Victoria always thought she was.

"I just… don't want to make you feel like I'm manipulating you-"

"Shut up, Rachel," Max cut her off, startling Rachel by the sudden fury. "I know we don't know each other well, but you took care of Chloe when I failed her. I would like to think that we're friends now and friends… friends help each other out. I'm not going to lose you to whatever this is! I won't… not if we can do something together about it."

Rachel held her eyes on Max. Max was not offering empty platitudes to comfort her. She could see it in her eyes. Through that shy exterior was a woman who was determined to help her in every way there was.

She could not help it. She surprised Max with a crushing, Chloe Price inspired hug. She knew it worked when the smaller girl squeaked in her arms.
"You're the fucking best Maxie..." Rachel mumbled into Max's arms.

Max said nothing, in silence they stood there in each other's arms. They had been pretty much strangers a mere twenty-four hours ago... and now here they were, bonded together through this terrible burden which they would face together.

As Rachel pulled back from the hug, she found herself in awe of the girl in front of her. She liked to think she would do this for a virtual stranger if the tables had be reversed... but she honestly did not know if she could. Rachel had always figured Chloe got her unconditional loyalty from her Dad. She still thought that he has a place in that... but now Rachel could see Max's in making Chloe the woman she fell for as well.

"You... the other version of you... god, this is such a mindfuck," Rachel clarified. "She said we can do it on our time... but I think we're going to have to quick about it. I don't know how soon to do it... I'm just so fucking scared... What if you get hurt again...?"

Max dug her fingernails into Rachel's tattooed wrist. It fucking hurt Rachel like an electric shock. She followed Max and took a seat next to her once again.

"Then I get hurt again. It does not matter, we're doing it, Rachel Amber," Max spoke with a surprising sternness as she pulled back to look Rachel in the eye. "Victoria's birthday is coming up... and I want to keep this to ourselves. Just give me some time to recover. After Victoria's parents leave... we can sneak off and do this again afterwards."

Rachel nodded and wrapped her arm around her friend and found herself smiling in spite of herself as Max buried her head against her arm. For the first time since the revelation, there was a small measure of relief in sight. Perhaps there was still time to advert a fate that she appeared to be driving towards blindly.

Chapter End Notes

This was a marathon writing session not seen in a while. It's nice to get to this point. As always, thanks for your continued interest. Next Chapter Icky Vicky gets her big b-day!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Watching the Caulfield sedan come to a stop in the Chase cul de sac, Victoria sighed and permitted herself a smile as her heart was aflutter.

It had been several days now since Max and her were together. It seemed that that somehow Max fallen ill sometime during her impromptu sleepover with Rachel Amber. It was suspicious that Rachel did not appear to be sick either. At first she figured Rachel introduced Max to her and Price's stash of drugs. This was vehemently denied by Rachel, who seemed… off as well.

Whatever that Price and her had missed that night, Max was not in a condition to answer anything and Rachel was far too tough to crack. So Victoria did what she hated the most. She just dropped it. Right now there was no room to rock the boat. Not when she had Price's damning observation of her as well.

If there was one thing productive that came out of Price and hers outing, it was the clearer understanding of what drove Price's annoying, bordering on threatening rekindling friendship she had with Maxine. Whatever problem Price might have had with Max, it was gone now. Replacing it was this insane desire to protect a friend she had no recent history with. What did Chloe Price know about Max Caulfield in the past few years that Victoria did not know? As far as she was concerned, Price and she were on equal footing.

The passenger door opened and out stepped the source of her stomach ache. Sure enough there she was. The source of romantic, sexual and friendly confusion herself.

It was Maxine Caulfield: The Angel of the Suburbs.

Maxine was wearing a simple dusty rose pink sundress which Victoria had insisted that Max pick up on one of their shopping trips. It was a hard thing to convince her to dress up, so that to see Max approaching up the driveway with her both of her parent's three steps behind her, Victoria appreciated the efforts which Maxine had done through just for her. She knew Maxine preferred dressing more practical, and Victoria was inclined let Maxine do Maxine, but still there was no denying the sight of her like this.

From a distance, it appeared as though Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield were nervous - or at the very least apprehensive - about the new world they stepped into. It was one thing to deal with Victoria. They at least had age and experience over her. The same could not be said about the Chase adults. Ryan went so far as to trim his beard and wore a casual cut navy blue suit and white undershirt, which was overdressed if she compared it to her father's polo and dress pants.

Unlike Vanessa wearing a simple shirt and shirt, Ryan looked uncomfortable, but it was to be expected when he was a hipster through and through. This fashion choice was something Victoria never thought she'd see on him even if they had a short period of interaction. Like father like daughter apparently.

As expected it was mother and father who were the ones to first approach Maxine and her parents. Victoria hung back from them, a mixture of embarrassment and shyness at the sight of the dressed
up brunette smiling gently at her in that heart stopping way. Besides, her parent probably preferred this. They were always on ceremony, always ready to perform the social dance even to those who did not even play in the same arena as they had.

This was not a slight against the Caulfield's at all (although if Price heard her thoughts, she would immediately construe it in the negative). The fact was, most people were not allotted the same sort of social placing her mother was born into and her father sledgehammered his way into. They didn't get a first-hand of the backstabbing and lies that came with it.

"Hello, Max dear, we're so happy you came!" Mother was the first one to speak, a wide smile for the short brunette. "Victoria was moping about the house about you being ill…"

Just like that, it had already begun. The teasing at her expense, letting slip things she wished to not share. What was it with parents doing that? Was it just some sort of genetic marker activated when they became parents to teenagers?

Although Victoria may have been fuming, Maxine broke out into a small giggle that served to make Victoria blush and sort of skip in place at being able to make Max smile and laugh at her embarrassment.

"I'm better now, thank you, Sienna," Maxine answered mother. She still sounded a little worn out, but much better than she had been days prior. Bed rest must have done her wonders.

As Mother nodded, it was father's turn to speak like clockwork.

"Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield, it's so great to finally meet you," he greeted Maxine's parents with a smile of his own which was uncharacteristically genuinely. He gestured to Mother and added "This is Sienna and I am Damien. Victoria has had nothing but praise for the two of you, so this meeting is about do."

Ryan looked at the Chase family as though he was staring at starving sharks. Victoria supposed that was not far from the truth. Emitting a cough, Ryan shuffled in place. Father, usually a man to find a way to exploit obvious weakness or insecurity, thankfully kept his mouth shut and gave Max's father the benefit of his silence.

"And Max here has done the same for both of you," Ryan returned as he dropped his hand on his daughter's shoulder. "I think Ryan and Vanessa will do, though. We're not last names sort of people or anything."

"Of course, Ryan," Mother continued before father could say something clever. With a smile for the Caulfield's, she turned to Max and added. "Max, We've had three girls on eggshells waiting for you, why don't you and the early birthday girl go on inside. We'll join you both in a while."

As Max looked from the parents to Victoria, she nodded and the teens watched as Dad gestured to Ryan and Vanessa to join him for a walk and talk around the grounds, leaving Maxine standing there with Victoria. For the first time, Victoria noticed the small package gripped between her fingers. Victoria shifted uncomfortably. It really was not necessary of Maxine to give her anything. Her presence alone was more than enough a gift for Victoria to relish.

"You look really beautiful, Victoria," Max spoke first, that sweet little smile she had been wearing growing slowly as she took tentative steps towards Victoria as the parents left their view.

"Thanks…" Victoria mumbled as that uncomfortable lack of control caught her off guard by Maxine's mere presence. "You - you look great… I'm really glad you're feeling better."
Max nodded. There was a strange flash that crossed her face, whatever it was Victoria did not know for sure, and right now with Max this close to her, her free hands' fingers intertwining into Victoria’s, Victoria wasn't so sure it mattered.

"So am I," she replied demurely. I got you something to make up for the absence… I know you try to pretend that you're, like, twice your age or something, but you deserve a gift on your birthday."

Victoria felt the immaculately wrapped gift Max held be pressed into her hands. As she glanced down to look at her gift she peered back up to the brunette who looked a little shyer now. Victoria must have had been looking like she was ungrateful. She was not in the slightest; it was just that she did not need a gift from her new friend. She did not need to be obligated or anything.

"It's not really a birthday, more of a farewell dinner to my parents," Victoria spoke up, elaborating her thoughts before Maxine thought Victoria was ungrateful. "We're not doing any sort of formal gift thing… You really didn't-"

Max stepped up onto her tops and silenced Victoria with a small peck on her lips. It was nothing passionate, but it certainly wasn't a kiss you just gave a friend. Whatever it was, it was enough to silence Victoria. Maxine's lips lingered for a moment before she pulled back to look up into the eyes of the stunned Chase.

"I wanted to. It's your birthday," she said simply. "Open it."

Victoria found herself inexplicitly speechless. She wanted to at least thank Maxine for the thought, but looking into that gentle gaze. She could do little more than carefully pick off the tape so that the conservative blue wrapping paper was not torn apart. Silently she took in the gift in her hand. It was so much more than she deserved.

It was a leather bound portfolio book. Similar to Max's but it was so much nicer. Embodied on bottom edge was a small 'V.M.C'. It was strange… Victoria hadn't recalled using her middle name in Max's presence before. She looked up to Max, silently tapping the embroidering. Max merely shrugged.

"I may have asked your Mom for some help," she said coyly as she slid up to Victoria's side. "I know that you do everything digital, but if you want to borrow my equipment or you switch over to analog this would be a perfect place to store your first physical collection; a little spot of your own so you don't hide away your beautiful work."

Still Victoria remained speechless. She wished that she could say something, anything to Max with the gift in her hand. Still she remained silent as Max touched the cover as though she was indicating there was more inside for her to see.

Sure enough there was. There, on the first page was Victoria. A cigarette dangling from her lips as she leaned on the side of her car. She looked proud, and perhaps a little pensive to Max's photographer eye, but the truth was, Victoria was a bundle of nerves. She had spent the day after meeting Max for the first time brooding and moody about just how good Max was on raw talent alone. Meeting Max… it was like meeting someone guided by an invisible hand. Everything flowed together in perfection.

"Our first photo shoot," Max recalled as she placed a hand onto Victoria's shoulder. "You looked so… regal or something… I don't have the right word."

She paused and huffed. She seemed to be pink in the cheeks. Max had all the talent, and a desire to encourage Victoria's to strive for her best work, but she had none of that confidence in her own.
Seeing that lack of self-respect... it physically hurt Victoria in the heart.

"Anyways, it was too brilliant an opportunity to pass up," Max muttered her dismissal of her photograph. "I'm sorry if that bothers you."

Victoria snapped her head back to look back at Max who was looking up at her. Victoria emitted a small smile as she pulled the short girl into a hug.

"No, not at all..." Victoria returned as she rested her chin on Max's head. "Maxine I do love this, but this ... this is too much."

She watched as Max rolled her eyes in a fashion that seemed all too familiar to her. It appeared she might have been rubbing off on her just a little. Maybe it was not such a bad thing. It would definitely give Price a decent boot in the box and show that she had a little less influence on Max than she thought.

"Victoria, you have been splurging on me all summer... like you think you need to buy me," Max spoke to her, an undercurrent of chastising in her steady and shy voice. "I wanted to get you something nice. To show that I... I really cherish this friendship we have."

Clutching the news journal portfolio tight against her chest as she guided Max indoors, Victoria did her best to keep herself visibly embarrassed. Yes... she might have gone out of her way to impress upon Max her worth. It was a silly behavior now that she knew Max better. She wasn't like the Vortex remora at all.

"...Besides..." Max said as they stepped through the entrance to the home. "I'm sure you'll get me something nice for my birthday... It's the Chase way."

Just as Victoria started to laugh and relax now that the gift giving was out of the way, the sound of scampering down the stairs grew louder. Much to Victoria's annoyance there was Chloe Price, dragging Rachel along by her hand. She grinned at Max as though she hadn't seen her friend in forever, which was ridiculous because they saw each other only this morning as she had taken to doing ever since Max fell ill.

Price was looking loud and dumb as usual, but behind her was Amber who appeared to at least present herself as apologetic for the sudden mood burst Price had initiated. She was grim faced as Chloe pulled away to surprise Maxine with a surprise hug, hefting the short girl up off the ground with little more than a grunt and a squawk of protest from Caulfield.

"Dude, where the hell you been?!!" Chloe greeted her old friend brightly as she squeezed Max. "Rachel said you were ill. You didn't have to hide away. I don't mind getting a little sick... I'm not prissy like someone."

Fuming, Victoria stepped back Maxine and Chloe and tuned herself out of the conversation so that she didn't do anything foolish. She glanced to her side and noticed Rachel standing there. She expected amusement from Amber; she expected that exhausting smug self-confidence Rachel fucking radiated.

Instead Victoria found herself looking at a ghost.

Rachel looked... tired and worn out. She seemed to be actively avoiding eye contact with Max and Chloe together as the two of them headed in the direction of the dining room for the dinner that was being prepared. As Victoria narrowed her eyes during her inspection of Price's girlfriend, Rachel snapped herself out of the morose exhaustion for a moment to examine Victoria right back.
"You're hopeless if you can't see she's trying to get under your skin," Rachel observed as she threw up her hand to gesture for them to follow Price and Maxine.

Victoria remained silent. Yes… perhaps she was letting Price do this to her far more than she should have.

...

With the handful of extra strength ibuprofen Rachel had discreetly given her while the others weren't looking, Max picked through her light salad and glanced around the table at the animated conversations occurring.

As much as she wanted to be here for Victoria, all Max really wanted to do was curl up in bed and hide. The physical pain lingered, sure, but what she feared the most was the crushing weight of time being perverted just for her. Whether it was fate, cosmic joke or something inconceivable all together, all she knew was she had no idea what to do anymore.

So far Rachel and she had managed to maintain some sort of normal façade. The two of them seemed able to keep up conversation with Chloe and Victoria without breaking down and spilling everything. It seemed to be a much easier task for Rachel. Then again, Rachel was probably thinking the same of her. Unlike Rachel, she didn't seem to have a death clock hanging over her head… or rather, not one in the near future. Whatever version of her that possessed her… it felt older.

Occasionally she stole a glance at Rachel, which Rachel was good enough to ignore. She could not begin to imagine what was going on in her head right now. Max could not claim to know Rachel well, but that morning after… she was scared. She doubted very much it had changed since. Privately she wondered if ache was going through the seven steps.

Catching Victoria's eye, Max emitted a smile for her as the conversations between the adults went silent. Max tilted her head looked up, and standing there she saw that Damien was standing, his glass of red wine in his hands as he scanned the table with an expression of satisfaction from the attention he now had.

Next to Max, she heard a small groan brewing from her friend.

"I have a few words to say on my daughter's early birthday," Damien pressed on. "I recognize how incredibly embarrassing this must be to our younger audience and especially to the centre of tonight's attention… but please, I ask you to indulge me."

"Dad… what the hell are you doing..." Victoria muttered just loud enough so that Max was the only one to hear her discontent.

Clearly it was loud enough for Damien to hear it, that or he saw the annoyance forming on his child's expression. Whatever it had been, it was enough for him to return it with an awful smirk of his own.

"Victoria," Damien addressed his blushing daughter. "It is hard to believe that it was nearly 17 years since I first held you in my arms, and that was the day I knew I could fall in love so hard and so deeply within first sight. Your mother did not have the piercing effect that you had… I am sorry to say that out loud, mostly because I'll have to answer for it later."
Next to Damien, Sienna rolled her eyes as she sipped her wine. Like her daughter, she too wasn't particularly thrilled by this.

"I shall give you a pardon if you'll just sit down, you damn fool," Sienna answered, her dismissal of her husband's behaviour earned a small laugh from mom, dad, Chloe and even Rachel. Whether it was sincere or not from Rachel, Chloe could not tell. She was a far better chameleon than she.

Grinning at his playfully stern wife, Damien sat down in his seat and reached out, offering his hand to his daughter. Victoria stared at it for a moment before she tentatively took it and allowed him to tighten his grasp.

"To see you now, on the cusp of adulthood, Victoria… I find myself stunned by who you have become: a sophisticated and creatively blooming human being," he spoke directly to her. "You've become an adult before my eyes. You are, perhaps, a little less like your mother and little too much like me, but that's the way it goes. We are so proud of you."

The annoyance had faded away from Victoria's expression. She looked to be a little more… forgiving to what her father was saying. Rachel seemed a little amused, and Chloe looked as if she was ready to say something but knew better than draw attention.

"So the question is now posed," he said thoughtfully. "What do I get the girl who can have anything at any time? It seems so impossible to find something out of reach… that was until Miss Amber pointed out the obvious: your friendship with Max Caulfield."

The entire table turned their focus to Rachel, who sat there in silence, her hands folded together. Victoria looked as though she was about to have a fit, Chloe was wide eyed and grinning that her girlfriend proudly. Mom and Dad looked at their daughter's new friend curiously.

The only person Rachel looked at was Max. It appeared that in Max's absence, Rachel Amber had been plotting.

"So far this summer so far has given me a window into you which seemed so very impossible up until now," he went. "The day Max Caulfield entered your life… I saw a contentment and vulnerability that I never saw before. You have a friend, a collaborator, and a person to push you to new depths. So your mother and I offer a gift to you: The opportunity to take this friendship back to Oregon when the new school year begins."

Sienna reached over and patted Max's hand. Max could barely comprehend it as everything started to make sense through her clouded thoughts.

"Max, Vanessa, Ryan… Damien and I would like to extend an invitation for you to attend Blackwell in September," she formally invited.

Max sat in silence as the invitation lingered in the room. Given recent events, she did not know if she was dreaming or not. Out of all the things that could have happened today… even the future version of her possessing her right here and right now. All of that seemed so much more likely than getting a free ride to Blackwell via the Chase's.

"This is unorthodox, Sienna and I both realize it. It hadn't crossed my mind until Victoria spoke of your artistic talents, and did not become real when I saw some of it… your photo session with a young, future model," Damien continued as he gestured to Rachel to acknowledge her. "I spoke with Raymond Wells just a few days ago. I informed him that you had a gift… something that Blackwell would be privileged to play a part in honing an amateur talent, into a gift. There was a recent financial injection into the arts program, and they are looking for more students of your
caliber."

Max did not know what to say, let alone how to keep her growing urge to dismiss Damian's words outright in check. She sat there and looked at all the faces.

First there was Victoria, who looked half pleased by the eye and half terrified. Something about it did not feel quite right. She knew that Victoria and Chloe had a history and a lot of tension. She knew that neither of them seemed to be willing to tell her why this was. Max was starting to suspect that that they were just being civil for her sake.

Chloe's face had lit right up. It was clear she wanted to say something but was not because nothing was set in stone. Even though she was readying herself for disappointment, that little spark remained. Burning with the recollection of the old days and an obvious hope they could start up where they left off in the days before William died. She occasionally looked at her girlfriend with pride for her involvement. Unbeknownst to Chloe, Rachel had not done this for her. Not fully at least.

Rachel was non-expressive as she and Max shared a look. With her whispering in Damien Chase's ear, Max could have easily seen why it was that Victoria felt the need to protect her from "Rachel's little games" as she so delicately put it. If she was driven by malice, then Max might have been concerned with how Rachel could game these things. It seemed as though while Max hid from the world in the wake of her temporal possession and feeling sorry for herself, Rachel was busy setting up possible avenues to maximize her own survival.

As for her parents… this all seemed liked too much. They did not see the ulterior reasons why Rachel advocated on Max's behalf, and because of that they seemed to be grateful as well, but still they were not on board for the most obvious of reasons…

"This is all… so much, Mr. Chase," Max finally spoke as she struggled to hide the enthusiasm in her voice so that she remained realistic. "I really do appreciate the offer, but… my grades aren't exactly the best in regular high school, I can't think of any way they'd let me in at a private academy."

It was a good answer, a good answer that got brushed aside from Sienna like it was just a nonissue.

"Officially, some promises on your end would have to be made," Sienna answered her question casually. "You would likely be placed on a probationary period of a term. You would have a tutor and to prove your academic merit in this time period, but from what I see around you, you'll have an extensive network of friends there to help you integrate and exceed."

"I can tutor in science and Rachel and… Vicky can do everything else, obviously! Her grades will be stellar!" Chloe tacked on as she downed her own glass of wine and nudged Rachel, who nodded concurrently. Victoria looked like she was prepared to rip Chloe's head off. Still, she smiled at Max and like Rachel she too nodded.

Mom and Dad smiled at the enthusiasm of the girls ready to do their part. Still, that clearly had not eased their minds.

"We appreciate the offer. We really do," Dad spoke to his host. "But… we can't accept this. If Max wants to go to school in Blackwell, we can take care of it our way."

Squinting at the Caulfield's as though he were being jested, Victoria's father leaned in. For the first time since she met Victoria, she saw the dripping sardonic source of Victoria's more… colorful inclinations to sarcasm.
"I have no doubt that you can; but humor me because I'm curious to know: if Max came home waving a scholarship form, would you encourage her to apply for it?" Damien inquired of Mom and Dad, his tone careful and concerned. "Would you send her along to take the interview and have her wait for months for a committee of people to comb through a list of names, leaving a better education for her in the hands of chance? What makes that okay, but the idea of an established art and photography gallery, of whom you are acquainted offering a private scholarship would be something to turn your nose up at?"

"Because we have no prior relationship to the scholarship people, Mr. Chase, that's cheating," Dad retorted almost right away. For the first time he seemed a little exasperated. Max supposed that for the uninitiated, an evening of Damien Chase was a handful. It was probably why Victoria was a little reluctant to introduce her family to Max.

Damien, on the other hand, blinked and sort of grinned as though he had no idea of the concept that was conflict of interest.

"Cheating..." Damien repeated, glancing at his wife. Thankfully Sienna wasn't interested in causing trouble for this evening. She actually had tact.

As he realized he was going alone, Damien rolled his eyes and turned away from his wife and directed he attention to Dad with those intense eyes Victoria used on her in those private intimate moments.

"I know I'm being forward, Ryan... and I also know that feeling you have as a father. Pride has a funny way of being ambiguous energy. It can be a source of strength or a poison. This time, it is a poison," he spoke to Dad lowly. He gestured to his surroundings and added. "All of this didn't just drop into my lap. I had a father, who came from a long line of fathers unprepared to swallow pride and take a leap out of poverty; and while you are certainly not poor, an education like the one this offers cannot be managed by you both without some sacrifice made... right?"

Mom and Dad's hard silence was all the confirmation Damien needed.

"I'm glad we can all agree this is the case. If you wish to have some financial skin in the game, so be it, it's a reasonable request. Pay for her living expenses and such. But please understand that this isn't a hand-out," he went on. "I said it before. Think of this as a private scholarship... with some strings attached. Most notable of which being that I would like to see Max's future work hanging in our studios..."

Damien flashed Max a small smile before he turned back to face Mom and Dad, who both seemed a little less defiant in the face of the pitch.

"Come on, you two. Quit the bullshit excuses..."

The remark came from Chloe, who looked at Max's parents like they completely nuts for even debating this offer. Not even Rachel grabbing Chloe's hand seemed to work to break the incredulous look Chloe had.

"Remember what my Dad said, Ryan?" Chloe spoke to Dad with as much neutrality as she could manage. She seemed to be biting back the urge to get any madder. "Sorry, Max. I know I'm putting you on the spot... It's just, if this is something Max wants, and an opportunity is smacking you in the face like this then you just have to forget pride and take it... even if the opportunity comes at the hands of a douchebag..."

"...no offense..." she murmured to Damien.
Damien emitted a small shrug.

"Probably the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a while, Chloe," he answered dismissively.

The levity in the room returned somewhat, it was enough to break the tension brewing between the fathers. Dad smiled a little and shook his head as he leaned back into his own seat. Mom turned to Chloe and offered her a kind look.

"No… you're not wrong, Chloe. This would be an awesome opportunity, but this is something that can't be decided on the fly," Mom answered on Dad's behalf. She turned to Sienna and added. "Max is still 16. She'll need a local legal guardian right? Or is that something the school assumes responsibility for?"

"She can be bound to school guardian or she could have a local legal guardian assume the responsibly over her," Sienna pointed out to Mom as she smiled faintly for Max. "I would try to get someone off campus. You would have more leniency in curfew matters."

Chloe, of course, glanced to Max and Rachel with a sneaky little smile. It was immediately noticed by Mom.

"Chloe, I love you, but I don't know if you and Rachel can take guardianship of a fellow student," Mom reminded Chloe, who threw herself back in her chair and rolled her eyes in a form of mock outrage for her plans being shot down before they even got off the ground.

"What about Joyce?" Max asked Chloe, unable to hide her note of enthusiasm.

The idea of seeing Joyce again was such a wonderful thing to thing to have back. Yet judging from the look on Chloe's face – a mixture of annoyance, guilt, anger – it seemed like the happy times of Joyce and William were long in the past. Something was happening that way and the last thing that Chloe wanted was to settle whatever grievance that developed between mother and daughter.

"Maybe…" Chloe muttered back to her as she folded her hands on the table. "I don't know if you'd want to deal with that. That whole situation is… not ideal. You'd be staying on a campus with a douchebag who would have personal skin in the game when it comes to you."

Not sure what that meant, Max merely nodded and reached over to pat Chloe's leg; if that was something Chloe was not cool with… then it would be fine. She would be fine with a school guardianship. She looked to Rachel, who seemed to have all the gears whirling in her head. In light of everything… being in close proximity with Rachel like this… it would keep her safe… or however this whole time travel passion worked…

"I could call my Dad and see if he'd be willing to take up a legal guardianship of her in Arcadia Bay…" Rachel spoke up, turning from Max to stare at Mom and Dad. "You're welcome to talk to him of course, and you could always come down to Arcadia Bay for a weekend and get to know him. He's the District Attorney down there… I can't think of a better man than him to keep this little troublemaker in line…"

Rachel emitted a thin grin as she reached over to ruffle up Max's hair. Chloe laughed, Victoria narrowed her eyes and Mom and Dad looked at each other for a moment. They seemed to be looking at Rachel in a much friendlier light than usual.

"I think that if he is up for it, it would be an excellent choice," Damien spoke for them as he refreshed Mom and Dad's drinks. "I realize I put you both on the spot, please, feel free to sleep on it. The decision doesn't need to be made right here and now."
As the conversation shifted away from school, Max met Victoria's eye. She looked a little nervous, but she seemed... fine... mixing her school life with this new thing that they started this summer. To be back in Arcadia, back in the company of old friends and new... well, it was a dream that was shadowed by this heavy burden she was now ensnared in.

She could only hope that it would all work out.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it's almost the one year since this story has started. Pretty crazy how fast this year went. As always thanks for sticking by me, every comment, and every critique. It's all appreciated. I hope you all have a Happy Christmas and a wonderful holiday's season!
Max Caulfield found herself fearing the cold that waited for her.

She did not remember a lot of her possession… for lack of a better word. It was a… strange experience to say the least. Yes, the feeling of watching Max (the future Max) interact with Rachel was like a movie, but it was not the thing that she dreaded the most. It was just the cold feeling that protruded through her during the whole possession. It was a creeping dread that what they were doing was not only unnatural; it broke all the laws of nature.

So with that dread poisoning her mind, Max found it difficult to believe that she was already back in her room with Rachel without the prying eyes of Chloe and Victoria following their every move. Chloe was out getting drinks and snacks for tonight's sleepover at Victoria's, and Victoria was seeing her parents off. It gave Rachel and Max a small window of opportunity to make this connection once again.

Thankfully for her, Rachel was more clearheaded about it. Considering she was getting warnings from the future about an impending death, she was being very clearheaded about it. She was juggling Max and her own conflicts of interest quite well. At least it seemed that way to Max. She had obvious urgent needs for future Max's knowledge. If she was as manipulative as Victoria implied, then Max had to hand it to Rachel for having this much talent that she was willing to risk so much for someone so quick.

Max closed her eyes and exhaled in an attempt to dispel Victoria's history with Rachel. Rachel seemed to be a good person, and most importantly of all, she really seemed genuinely concerned about Max's health and the strain this had caused on Max. It was so much so that Rachel wasn't sure if she wanted to let a third encounter happen for the rest of the month. It was amazing thing to do, in the face of her impending death to look out for her like this.

But once more Victoria's warnings came back to mind and infected her thoughts. Max was now that she was on track for a scholarship to Blackwell which Rachel herself had played a part in getting for her. Rachel could afford giving Max a little more time for rest between encounters during the summer if she was going to get ten months of schooling with her.

Max pushed the thoughts out of her mind. She had no time to doubt Rachel's intention. The idea of Rachel dying and her not doing anything to help… God, the amount of pain losing Rachel would cause Chloe… and Chloe didn't deserve that… not after William… not after whatever happened to lead to Rachel's mother dying.

So Max looked around for a distraction and focused intently on just about all of the Caulfield linen lining her room. Together the two of them had tried to plan out every possibility, knowing full well that the version of her from the future had acquired some sort of biological time manipulation. It would not take much effort for her to unravel anything they did.

The bedroom door opened. In entered Rachel Amber. In one hand, she held on to a bottle of Xanax, a glass of water in the other.
She was pale and nervous looking. Max could sympathize with her. She was about to spend time with someone who knew her future… or lack of one. Max could not imagine having to speak about such things. Yet, in spite of her fear there was an intractable expression of determination which Rachel wore and Max could not help but envy. If it had been her in this position, she would no doubt have shrunken up and collapsed.

Whatever that was going on inside Rachel's mind, whatever battle that was waging behind Rachel's frightened blue eyes, Rachel Amber kept it hidden as she handed the glass to Max opened the pill bottle. She tapped the bottle into the palm of her head and silently counted through the pills.

Max took a small sip of the water as she watched Rachel divide the pills and put away the excess. As soon as she was done, she turned around on the bed and sat cross-legged next to her. Rachel's head was bowed as she looked at the pills. She was in complete silent contemplation as she struggled to find the right words which to speak to Max with.

Exhaling, Rachel opened her left hand to reveal two Xanax tablets.

"This much will make you not give a shit about anything at all for the session," Rachel spoke almost clinically. "It should help keep you a passive host through this…"

Rachel trailed off and opened her other hand. In it were five Xanax tablets staring back at Max.

"This much will make your brain think your body is too heavy to use, You'll be sluggish and slower mentally. You'll… she'll… be less inclined to do anything else but lay there and answer questions, I hope," Rachel explained as she looked at the pills as Max had done. "If you're worried, I can say that it's tried and tested. two nights ago, we dabbled in it. Victoria with two, Chloe with four and myself six. Victoria was fine, Chloe was pissy and I was sick in the morning, but we're alive…"

Max's eyes widened, her lip curled up unconsciously.

"What…why didn't Chloe say anything about that?" she barely asked at a tone of a whisper.

For the first time, Rachel looked somewhat guilt ridden. Her eyes lowered, like she was ashamed.

"I… tricked her. I started with four, but I took two more when Chloe wasn't looking… I'm not proud of lying to her, even about this… but… it's something that had to be done..." Rachel dismissed with a wave of her hand like it was no big deal, but her expression was still tellingly gloomy.

Doing her utmost supress that feeling for the good of them both, Rachel looked up from the pills and stared determinately into Max's eyes.

"The amount you take is a decision only yours to make, Max," Rachel reassured her. "Or you can just… say no if you want. Maybe it will be easier this time. I just want to maintain control. I would rather not have some older… you having access to a sober body and mind."

Under any other circumstances, Max would probably immediately have asked Rachel the question: 'Does Victoria do drugs?' There was still so much about Victoria that Max did not know and this little slip of the tongue committed by a girl in distress was probably something she would not have heard about. Rachel was usually steadfast in the unspoken feeling that Victoria and Max get to know each other without Chloe and hers intervention.

Max echoed the bravery of Rachel and took Rachel's hands. It was a pale shadow by comparison, but she felt Rachel needed the comfort. From how her hands were shaking, even Max could see she
needed it.

Max's fingers tightened around Rachel's left hand and grabbed the five pills. Before Rachel could respond, Max swallowed them and went for the water on her bed stand.

"Better safe than sorry," Max murmured as she took a drink while Rachel's eye's stared widely. "I'm not going to risk your life for my comfort. Besides… I'm probably going to get sick regardless…"

There was a strained silence growing between the two of them as Max watched Rachel struggle to say anything at all to comfort Max. Max did not mind the silence too much. It gave Max a few moments to wonder just how fast acting the medication would be. For some irrational reason there was a wave of fear for the drugs itself. This was her first time using something harder than Aspirin… not that she would admit it to the girl next to her.

Max felt her hand grabbed and looked up to meet Rachel's thoughtful smile. As much fear as she may have felt, Rachel was another form of intoxicant. Just one look from her… it had a way to soothe the fear brewing underneath the surface.

"I know it must be obnoxious to have to hear me say thank you like every other sentence…" Rachel spoke up to break their silence, her fingers tracing Max's joints. "But I mean it every time… I rather like being alive…"

A strange wave of shyness caught her off guard. There was an unspoken power behind Rachel's words. She had been noticing in their interactions. Even Victoria sometimes got caught in it, and that transfixing effect Rachel possessed seemed to be the source of their tension. Years into their relationship, even Chloe seemed to get muddled by Rachel.

Rachel reached out and pushed up Max's chin to get her back to eye level. She found Rachel was staring once again at her. There was a strange little smile which peeled away the grimness of what was about to happen.

"I mean it, Max. I truly do."

Max nodded, but Rachel did not seem finished. She seemed to think Max was just… offering a platitude or something. The smile was a veneer that quickly chipped away to reveal the rot and decay of Rachel's seemingly unshakable self-assurance, even in the face of investigating her own death. Now Rachel… she looked… just as scared and uncertain as Max had.

It was a horrible feeling to have, but Max took a small measure of comfort she was not alone in feeling this way.

"I know Victoria has probably told you stories about me, which Chloe probably agrees, albeit in nicer terms - that I'm little miss popular or something like that," Rachel said as she looked away to stare at the wall ahead of them. "Well… they're right in a way. I can charm people, but my only real friend all this time has been Chloe… and only Chloe. It's… so... hard to open up and trust others. They may be sweet to me and have no ulterior motive and great people, but… that doesn't erase what happened, or my feelings towards others. So... I guess that I have spent such a long time… being fake."

Rachel bit at her lip for a moment as she examined Max carefully.

"I am very lucky to count you as my second real friend, Max Caulfield," she confessed as she glanced to Max. "Chloe… she was lucky to have you for as long as she did. To show bravery the
way you have. I thought was just something she picked up from William and Joyce… but I'm starting to see your place in her as well."

Her mind buzzing at Rachel's proclamation and by her flattery, Max could not help but emit a snort.

"I'm not brave…" Max blurted out to Rachel, her words desperate. "I really want to do this, but I'm just… I'm just really scared, Rachel…"

There was no judgement, or no shame. Rachel answered Max's fear by reaching out to pull the brunette into her arms. The pressure of Rachel's lips touching against Max's head like a mother comforting a child caught her off guard.

"I know that you are, and so am I Max, but I'll protect you," Rachel promised her softly. "It's what friends do."

Nodding, Max laid her head on Rachel's head as her brain started feeling lighter. In spite of her fear, Max believed her new friend.

...

As soon as the pills took their hold on Max, and she felt Max start to slump into her arm drowsily, Rachel Amber raised Max's camera and took their photo.

She felt terrible doing so. She hadn't offered the stoned girl one final chance to back out, and it felt perverse to do so. Rachel forced herself not to doubt too much. Max told her numerous times she wanted this in spite of her fears. It was Rachel's fears that made her take the photo without hesitation. If she had… well… she did not know if she would have been able to go through with it otherwise.

With an apology brewing for Max when she came back, Rachel watched in unspoken horror as Max Caulfield opened the eyes of her friend.

Perhaps it was more accurate to call her something else entirely. Calling the being inhabiting Max, Max felt so fundamentally wrong even with the knowledge that this was just another version of Max. Thankfully there was a lot less blood; it was just a simple nose bleed, compared to the virtual geyser which erupted the first time around. Rachel preferred no blood, but at least this was manageable.

Max was silent as she laid there silent in Rachel's arms, allowing Rachel to apply pressure to the bleeding. She did her utmost not to look into the stranger's eyes, who was observing her in silent judgment. Gone was the enthusiasm of being in the same room as a person who had died. Max seemed far more grounded, more… in control of herself as opposed to last time.

As much as she wasn't a fan of this, Rachel was a little heartened to see that the drugs must have done their thing and the body that this alien Max possessed seemed physically incapable to do much more than lull in her arms limply.

"How long has it been?" Max simply asked, her words a slur, her eyes dilated.

Like this experience, this Max's vocal tone was alien to the sweet little thing Rachel was friends with. It was far less earnest and far more world wearied… and more strangely than that, there was
a note to her voice that made her uncomfortably recall her Dad's voice. Tired and world weary of
the amount of shit he had to deal with.

"Only been a few days. We needed time for Max to recover from what you did to her," Rachel
addressed the body invader stiffly. "So... you're back... I can't say I'm happy to see you."

There was a low chuckle that emitted from the dazed intruder. Max rolled her eyes around and
bobbed her head from side to side to examine her surroundings the best she could.

"Towels... I guess I did leave an impression," Max said as she finished looking around her
bedroom bleary-eyed. She focused her dilated eyes back to Rachel as she added. "The last time I
was here, I brute forced my way in. The journey I took... it was a trail not yet blazed. Still... the
Xanax is a nice touch. Keep her calm and myself, far too medicated to do anything... the
benzodiazepines... it messes with equilibrium, and it makes jumping harder to do."

Giving Max a final squeeze on her nose to clean the last of the blood, Rachel released Max to her
own limited movements and backed away from her. She was satisfied her idea seemed to work.

"Are you stuck here until the drugs wear off??" she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest as
she glared at Max, who had rolled onto her stomach and attempted to drag herself across the bed.

Rachel found herself at least somewhat elated as she watched the future incantation of Max shake
her head in response, a low sloppy laugh emitting from her.

"It's quite easy to let go of this connection to this Max," she answered Rachel's remark. "The drugs,
however, make it harder to leap frog back and forth through local time... but... I guess that's why
you did it?"

Rachel examined Max wearily. She could not believe that this was the same Max, only a few years
older. Again... it was that James Amber vibe. That silent confidence she had spent her entire life
time learning. All in all it was a far cry from the girl she knew.

"Just because I believe you, doesn't mean I trust you," Rachel replied, attempting to put her sobriety
as an advantage over a person who had all the card. "You jump back in time and quite causally
announce that I'm fucking dead. How did you know all that specific shit? Not the earthquake, I get
you could use the magic of Wikipedia in the future to look that up. I mean how did you know what
I had on me. Is that what you do when you talk about the short jumps? You stole information from
me and rewound it so it didn't happen"

Once again a low chuckle came from the struggling possessed Max. There seemed to be twitches...
spasms in her next... like there was another person still fighting inside of her.

Rachel redirected her focus. She could not think of that right now.

"You're a lot smarter than I suspected you are... but I guess I'm not dealing with a junkie... am I?"
Max replied as she propped her head against the wall. "Under normal circumstances these short
jumps are a skill I can do which is as easy as breathing now. Under these circumstances, however,
it's a challenge and will affect you stronger when I am sober, and almost impossible under the
influence. Did you get a headache talking to me the last time?"

Rachel barely comprehended anything Max said beyond the point of getting called a junkie.
What... what was she talking about? Yeah she did drugs and drank, but it was not at a level above
anyone else in Blackwell. What in the fuck motivated her to say that? More importantly why did
she become a junkie? She had a real life deterrent to that sort of lifestyle. She called that
"I was physically ill," she muttered as she finally looked up to meet the glazed but staring eyes of the time traveler. "How... far into the future did you come from? Do I even want to know?"

A semi-ricus grin formed on Max's face. Perhaps it was just the drugs doing their thing, but she seemed to be amused at Rachel's expense.

"When I came from?" Max repeated. "I could tell you, but what's really going to keep you up at night is where I am from..."

Rachel could only blink. Yeah, Max was right... that was probably going to keep her up at night.

"I jumped back from 2021, but the 2021 I am from is not the 2021 of this... reality... universe?" Max spoke in a daze as she seemed to ponder her own answer. She lazily shrugged as she added. "I don't even know. All that I can hypothesize is that in my younger, more obtuse days, I made a decision to alter my own timeline. It was a terrible decision, and trying to correct it... I think I split off new, alternate realities. One of which being all of this. You being friends with this version of me... it has no place in my time line."

It did not matter how much she prepared to contain her shock, time travel was a difficult pill to swallow, but given the events and overwhelming evidence given to her, swallow she did. But what Max was talking about was a hundred thousand steps beyond comparatively simple time travel. She was talking about different timelines in different reality... a multiverse of sorts.

This had to be bullshit. No, this NEEDED to be bullshit!

"You're telling me that... what... all of this isn't real or something. That you created it?" Rachel spoke in barely more than a whisper as that familiar feeling of vomit bubbling in her stomach started churning in her.

Max shook her head.

"I can't claim that I did anything beyond influence," she answered her. "I'm... cautiously certain that everything in this line is no less real then it is in mine. It's all just a matter of variables; a variable which I... perverted for selfish reasons."

There was an overwhelming to rage and rebel against what Max speculated. It was a desire to cause pain to the source of the person who shook everything for her. The only reason she resisted striking her, was the faint recollection that while the voice was alien to this... reality; the body belonged to her friend.

"How do you know you're some sort of original timeline Max and not a creation of another Max?" Rachel hissed back at her.

As much as Rachel had tried to hurt and shake the messenger of her doom, Max did not seem perturbed by this attempt at a turnaround at all. It was more than likely a topic which was well treaded for her. The years of holding this time and space travelling ability, how could she not think big picture?

"I don't know, Rachel. That might be true as well. I do not hold a masters in theoretical physics and even if I did, I doubt this is anything that could be fully grasp." Max replied as she rubbed her ticking face. "All I know is that I have set up some rules to follow by: namely, not rooting around in the past."
Rachel stopped her pacing. Her mind was swimming still in the multiverse theory to be fully committed to the conversation. Thankfully Max seemed to too stoned to care as she waited Rachel to say something, anything.

"Aren't you breaking them by coming here to warn me?" Rachel interrupted, squinting at the stoned time traveler.

Once again Max shrugged, but in her state Rachel suspected it was really the only movement which she could physically make at the moment.

"I am, but this is not my timeline I am affecting, now is it?" Max murmured as she closed her eyes and rolled her shoulders back, her bones audibly cracking. "Besides, I have had some time to think this out. There are ways to lessen my presence. These rules must be followed to the letter if I am to help you."

Exhaling, Max opened her eyes. For a flashing moment, she seemed alert as she stared dead into Rachel's eyes.

"I will tell you off the bat… yes, you are murdered," Max spoke with the briskness of a cop. "You were forced a lethal dose of GHB. The lines are blurred between manslaughter and a flat out murder; but I suppose that it doesn't really matter, because that matters is that you're dead, and you died long before I returned to Arcadia Bay in 2013... Making all of this... well..."

Max trailed off. She must have been aware that the statement tore right through Rachel's heart. No matter how much she thought she was prepared for details on her demise, the moment she got them, all that she wanted to do was crawl up into a ball and hide from her fate.

Silently, Rachel slumped next to Max. She buried her face into her hands and tried her utmost to tune out the details Max had dropped on her. She thought she could have handled it. She was being naïve once again.

"It's..." Max started and then stopped. "I'm sorry, Rachel. It's a hell of a thing to learn... but there it is. You're going to die, but I want to give you a chance to dodge this."

That throbbing sense of loss had overwhelmed her once again, but this time it was not for her Mom, but instead for herself. All of this... it was all too much for her.

"And you're not going to tell me how or when, right?" Rachel snapped back, unable to hide her anger at Max.

Max took a moment to stare at Rachel before a nod confirmed the worst. She seemed to understand Rachel's need to shoot the messenger.

"Not right now... not until we get closer to the events. Granting you too much knowledge may very well jeopardize my ability to have a clear path of events," Max addressed the blonde as though she were a mother. "They may already be altered, but until I get a clearer picture I will keep it to myself. There is still a relatively large period of time between now and the day you... die and as far as I can see, you are every bit the Rachel I was warned about."

Giving Rachel a moment to think over just what it was Max had learned about her in this other timeline, Max pushed herself forward and crawled within arm distance of Rachel. She wiped her mouth and looked up at Rachel with half closed eyes.

"For now, our efforts are to figure out what is the same and what is different," she mumbled as she situated herself. "I need to learn about just who you are, and you need to know the Rachel I learned
about because this… because this isn’t at all how we meet, and none of what you have here is what you have in my timeline."

In her hands was Max’s phone. There on the screen was a group selfie with Max, Chloe Victoria (reluctantly) and herself. Chloe and she were kissing and Max and Victoria were cozy. Judging from the mixture of shock and bemusement, splashed on Max’s face, none of this seemed to be a concept she was used to.

"This relationship with Chloe you have is an anomaly in my timeline," she informed her. "I know you met at Firewalk and how you both just clicked. I know that Chloe confessed her feelings for you, but something did not click for you. You did not feel the same for Chloe as Chloe felt for you."

Rachel’s mouth fell open. Chloe and her… they didn't get together? She didn’t fall in love with Chloe? How was that even possible? Meeting Chloe had changed everything for her. She was her best friend, how could she not fall for her?

There was something about Max's voice. She heard it plenty of times before listening to Vortex Club girls about their boyfriends, or Dana Ward about Juliet Watson. It was jealousy, seeing someone with someone other than themselves…

"How could I not?" Rachel said as she redirected herself and turned to Max, whose eyes were narrowed at her. "I thought she was a fucking hottest thing I ever saw. She kicked the shit out of a couple of guys. I probably had like… gay panic in your timeline… what the hell are you doing?!"

Before Rachel could do anything, Max had rolled up her sleeve and pulled out her arm so that she could inspect it. She ignored the protests as she turned it over carefully.

"You have no scar…" she observed plainly as she allowed Rachel to retain control once again.

"Yeah, of course I do…" Rachel retorted.

She rolled her arm over and showed Max the scar tissue on her forearm. She even took Max's hand and let it run over the tattooed scar tissue. As she stared at the scar a little longer, Max retracted her hand and shook her head.

"That’s not the right one I was looking for," Max said "The night Chloe and you found out about Sera, you decided to seek her out on your own. Chloe got in contact with Frank Bowers to connect with her and you got stabbed in the process by Damon Merrick. You nearly died. You… you never got to meet Sera."

Never met Sera… in another universe, she never met Sera. She never got to know her birth mother. She never found someone else to love and trust and confide in. The Rachel of this other timeline… she did not have Chloe – at least not in an intimate way – and she did not have Sera. She must have had such a hole in her life that she filled it with… whatever it was Max was hinting at. Drugs by the sound of it…

She looked up to see Max was staring at her. Max wanted a give and take exchange of information. She gave her version of events; it was Rachel’s turn now. Silently, Rachel reached into her pocket and handed Max her phone. The screensaver of Mom and her would be all the proof she needed.

"That didn't happen at all," she said as she struggled to find her voice in the face of this information overload. "I mean… yeah, Chloe said she’d call Frank, but then I guess my Dad decided to do the right thing. I was so angry at him and with Chloe for working together like they did. But Dad kept
his word and he brought Sera into the picture… Are you telling me I never got to know her?"

Max did not reply as she examined the phone screen. Her eyes darted back and forth, her lip curling slightly.

"Meeting you… it really did save her life, Rachel," Max whispered as she examined the photo on Rachel's phone. "Sera… she relapsed… she died, a year after you did… Fentanyl overdose…"

Rachel felt a second gut punch overwhelm her at the statement. Sera, like her, had died to a drug overdose…fenta… fenta whatever the fuck that was. Sera had fought so hard to be clean, and in this other time not only did Rachel know the lengths it took for Sera to get to a point to be there for her, but then just… shrivelled up and gave up when Rachel died.

Rubbing her forehead and feeling somehow even sicker, she glanced to Max, who as out of it as she was; she seemed to have enough in her to look sympathetic for this new revelation.

"How did you learn this?" Rachel demanded from her. "Was it Chloe?"

There was a small pause, and then Max gave a small nod.

"She kept in touch with your parents for a while until James finally told her to leave them alone," she informed her. "Chloe was such a fixture in your life, even if it wasn't romantic that Rose couldn't handle it."

Rose was alive. Rose was alive, Sera was dead and she was dead. None of this made sense anymore. It was like it was some lame old sci-fi show Chloe pretended she did not watch. She wanted to react by breaking something. She probably would have if it had been in her room. Mom was alive, but she was in a separate world, timeline, whatever and she couldn't contact her. This was all so fucked up… so unbelievably fucked up. And sitting there staring at her fury was the reason she had to know this.

If what she said was true, if she had went back and time and created this split, then she was responsible for this. She did not know if she wanted to thank her or knock her around. She would make her apologies to her version of Max afterwards.

"Why are you even helping me?" Rachel growled as she leaned in close to stare down Max. "I'm still dead, Sera is still dead in your timeline, and you have nothing to gain from this. So why come here and manipulate my timeline?!"

Rachel's anger… it seemed to hurt Max. She twitched as though she had received some sort of shock. For a moment, seeing her respond in some measure of pain felt good to her; it was a taste of the amount of pain Max had inflicted on her in such a short span of time. It felt good right up until she remembered that her Max was likely affected as well.

"Because knowing there is a timeline out there where you live," Max breathed to her finally, her voice pained as she glared up at Rachel. "Maybe it'll help someone who means so much to me."

Rachel stared at the older woman possessing Max. The annoyance in her voice, the flashes of anger in her expression, it was all so obvious. Max patted the seat next to her and silently, Rachel sat back down as a single overriding concept drowned everything else.

Chloe Price was not just a friend to Max in the other timeline. Chloe Price was hers.
Chapter End Notes

Another chapter down. Thanks for reading!
"Ma'am? Ma'am are you awake back there? We've arrived..."

Max jerked herself back to the waking world and found her Uber driver looking at her encouragingly. Like, she was maintaining her professionalism, but obviously she needed to get going to her next client. If Max was not in physical pain right now, she might have felt slighted by being called 'ma'am'.

With her mind throbbing, she could only manage a small nod directed to the driver. She... must have been zoned out for at least fourteen hours easy. Time operated funny while under the pressure of extra-universal travel. In spite of her now having these abilities for ten years, she had barely understood it enough to control these little quirks.

"Sorry for dozing off like that, it was a long flight..." she murmured to the driver after giving herself a moment to collect herself.

She noticed the sympathetic nod of the driver but did not catch the words she was saying. She was still a little lost in a far off world which was not her own. Max grabbed her travelling case and as soon as she tapped her card over the driver's phone, she opened the door and stepped out of the car. She gave the driver a small apologetic wave.

Rubbing her head for a moment before she pulled her ponytail out to allow her long dark locks to fall down her back, she took in the familiar suburb she had settled in with a small smile. She was home, and she couldn't have been more thrilled about it. A long three weeks away from her reason for continuing.

Max slowly made her way towards her home. It was a modest cookie cutter suburban home nestled safely outside the city limits. It was not her first choice in large part because of her hipster inclinations. It was not somewhere she expected to be in at this place. She figured she would end up in some shitty little apartment like back when she was in her early twenties. But life found a way to surprise her. It gave her a reason to retire from her urge to bask in bohemian lifestyle with her one true love.

*Chloe Price*

God what was she going to tell her about this little adventure into another timeline? How was she going to explain that she knew Rachel in this timeline? And not only that, it seemed like Rachel had finally found some sort of peace with herself; peace with whatever restless spirit that raged and fought inside her until her death.

As grim as it might have been to even think, perhaps what happened to Rose Amber had indeed been the best for Rachel. As lovely as Rose in the limited time they saw one another, she could not help but notice that even in her death Rose and James coddled Rachel, protecting memories instead of facing up to the certain unpleasant truths. This... coddling led to Rachel's resentment and rebellion, and worse of all, underestimating the cruel world that waited for her. She thought she could just take the world by storm and damn the consequences. Well... Max had seen better people...
chewed up and spat out. That was the nature of her work.

But there in the other timeline, Rachel not only saw real shattering death, she played a role in it. She learned life was not a whim she could just improvise through. Actions had consequences and between this hard lesion, a father who took the kids gloves off and treated her as an adult and Sera, a birth mother who had traveled down the route she was heading guiding her along a better path, perhaps it would be enough to keep her out of the hands of Prescott and worse: Jefferson.

Max paused as her thoughts drifted away from the bastard who ruined her pursuit of professional photography and returned back to the uncomfortable truth about Rachel she had spent years trying to deny.

Chloe Price was in love with Rachel Amber.

The only reason it did not work out was because of Rachel's inability to just settle for a love right in front of her eyes. She chose to be flippant with Chloe's love, and chased after whatever that made her feel good in that moment. The risk she chose led her down a dark path, of which she would never come back from.

But this Rachel was different. This Rachel had found herself in love with Chloe in this timeline and it was not just a teenage love affair either. This was something real. This is something she shared with Chloe herself. It was a sort of love which Rachel had felt was something to base forever off of. This was something she with her Max. That... idea bothered her the most.

It was... foolish to get jealous of a teenager for a relationship that did not exist in this reality. She was fully aware that it was not her Chloe she was getting worked up over, yet but for some reason or another that was what she felt inside that Max: It was that familiar trace of jealousy and the desire to show Chloe that she was a better choice for her. That Rachel Amber would bring Chloe nothing but pain and ruin, because that was all she knew about her.

It was all so maddening. Here she was, a nearly thirty year old woman and yet still looking at that photo of Rachel and Chloe on the other Max's phone drove base desires to hurt Rachel to protect her place as Chloe's one and only true love. She wanted to just spill to Rachel what she did with Frank Bowers and Jefferson. She wanted to plant the seed of doubt into everything Rachel had.

But there was something stopping it. Once again, that was Chloe Price as well.

At the end of everything, this experiment in temporal manipulation was for her wife, and Max had to keep on reminding herself of that. Chloe's happiness was paramount priority for years. Yes, Chloe's heart had healed, yes Chloe seemed to accept that Rachel was gone, but If... if Rachel Amber was her angel for real... then she would do her part to help maintain that love for that version of Chloe, mostly because she loved her Chloe Price.

Yet despite of this Max knew that she had to tell Chloe. A long time ago Max and Chloe promised each other nothing but honesty to one another. They went through so many lies throughout their childhood as well as their teenage years that they decided to never subject each other to deception. Even if the truth Max had to explain would inevitably hurt.

"Mommy, you're home!"

As soon as Max had opened the door, she found herself hit by a force of nature. The force was a sting bean shaped strawberry blonde mass of hair and noise. In spite of everything clouding her thoughts, Max had to smile she found herself looking down on the second love of her life.
That joy came in the form of Nora Joyce Caulfield-Price, and with the exception to Chloe she was Max's *everything*. She was a product of a donation, Chloe's egg and nine months of growing discomfort for Max. At the end of the ordeal (which she swore never to repeat), it was replaced with a lifetime of fear and worry for a living breathing human being that was Chloe and hers alone.

It was not a perfect situation, of course; nothing ever was, and that was the first lessons she learned as a new parent. Max's work kept her out of Seattle for long periods, leaving her away from Chloe and Nora for far longer than she ever wanted to be; but if there's one thing she'd come to learn since becoming a working mother it was sacrifice. The one thing that kept her going was knowing that she had Chloe in her life picking up the slack in which she left in her wake. Chloe through some miraculous way became Joyce, or at least some version of her. Losing her in that storm it changed everything for Chloe. Sort of clarity came over her and she realize that actions have consequences at long last.

Max pulled her daughter into her arms with a small huff. She was a little heavier than she remembered her. Five years old and growing like a weed. It would not be long before Max would be dwarfed by Nora as well by the looks of it.

"Sweetheart, I missed you so much!" she cried as she pressed her lips against Nora's forehead. "You lost another tooth?! Why didn't you tell me over our calls?"

"It's *suppos' to be surprise!" Nora answered her, revealing her missing incisor to her mother with a wide grin to show the extent of it. "I missed you so much, mommy! Mom and I are making breakfast… are you going to have some?!"

With a widened, slightly exaggerated smile for her child Max nodded, allowing Nora to slide down her. Max did her best to ignore the sharp nails that dug into her.

Nora took Max's hand and silently, she followed her daughter towards the kitchen. The smell of waffles and bacon wafted into her senses. She could hear the faint cursing, which immediately stopped as soon as Chloe Price-Caulfield set the spatula down and turned to face her wife. There she stood in all of her glory. Like her daughter Chloe was another strawberry blonde Max loved dearly. She had long since abandoned her trademark blue and returned back to her natural colour. It was an unspoken homage to parents whom Chloe missed every day. Clad in black booty shorts and a white sleeveless which was tie-dyed by Nora and Chloe while she was gone by the looks of it.

Throwing off her apron, Chloe placed her hand onto her hips and slowly she gave Max a saucy little smile which always found a way to wind Max up into a state of sexual tension. It was made awkward by the face she had Nora hanging off her.

"Where is my greeting?" Chloe playfully demanded, her head tilting to one side as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Why don't I get to have this embrace?"

Max smiled back and stepped forward, pretending not to notice Nora was hanging off her still. She smiled as she suddenly found herself in Chloe's grasp. Chloe's arms slinked low and wrapped around her waist as she buried her head into Max's shoulder.

"Welcome home, *Double O Max,*" Chloe welcomed her wife, pressing her lips against Max for a moment, before looking to Nora and then renewing the kisses with much more dramatic flair to rile their daughter up at a child's natural inclination to be disgusted by parental affection.

Laughing into the kiss, Max pulled away, keeping one arm laced around Chloe, the other instinctively reaching out to gather up Nora to hold just as tight.
As much as she tried to push that away, there was an unspoken guilt Max felt for making a living working contract corporate and industrial espionage.

Yes, it was a far cry from her dream as a professional photographer which she dreamed of in her youth. Mark Jefferson had inadvertently poisoned her passions for the field. The thing was, her talents were not going to go away and they were being wasted by ignoring them. She had a natural inclination to snoop, a trained photographer sense and the ability to jump through time. Falling into a career of uncovering secrets for others was only a logical fit for her. It did not take long before she found herself in an unofficial private investigation gig before getting recruited by a far richer clientele motivated to uncover secrets that went far beyond sleazy affairs and insurance fraud investigations.

This expansion of her job took her to all sorts of places around the world, from here in America to the farthest reaches of man on this planet. Yet while her dream to travel the world was sated, it was nothing to the immense loneliness she felt while she was out there in the world on her own. Even if she was able to take Chloe and Nora along – which there was no way in hell she could subject them to that – it was not like she would be able to spend any adequate time with the two of them.

Despite this, Max swallowed her disillusionment with the only job she was ever good at and pushed on in a fashion not dissimilar to that of how her father and mother were before they moved to Seattle; working not because they loved it, but because they had to survive. She knew that Chloe could work. She was a trained automotive engineer now. But someone needed to stay home for Nora, and when it came down to it, Max was making more money than Chloe could ever hope. Seattle was expensive and Max… well, Max had a plan.

"God, It's wonderful to be back home too," Max returned to the two of them, finally finding her voice as she pulled back. "It feels like it's been forever since I've been back home. I'm… thinking of pulling myself off the market for the rest of the year. Is that agreeable to the two of you?"

Max smiled as Chloe and Nora shared a look as though they were debating for real. Then again, for all she knew they really did need some time to figure out their stance. She was gone for long periods at a time. She had to accept she did not have the relationship with them as she should have.

Taking this breaks was not heard of in the Caulfield-Price household, or even her own clients. Her work was exhaustive and under most circumstances, Chloe and Nora was all the reasons she needed to walk away for large swaths of time. This time, however, it was not entirely motivated by reasons to do with family.

Whether Chloe liked it or not, it would not be long before she woke up with another photograph of Max and Rachel in her collection. Rachel's survival depended on Max being undistracted by her work. She would not only need time for recovering from long periods in this other timeline, she would need Chloe there filling in the gaps for Max. She needed to know what happened in this timeline, and what happened in the other to create such a remarkable difference.

"Yeah I suppose we'll permit you to be a stay at home mom as well," Chloe said as she placed a cup of coffee in front of Max. "Mongolia is a far off- albeit hipster location - to end up in. Am I allowed to ask about it, or is it all on a need to know basis, Price, Max Price?"

There was a note of sarcasm buried deep in the good nature of Chloe's tone. As much as she loved Max, Chloe was not nearly as thrilled about her career path. It seemed cool and exciting at first and the money helped; but time and distance added up. As did the terrible things Max had to do sometimes; which, while were erased by her time manipulation, were not as easily forgotten by her memory. The things she had to do to survive in her work… the blood she sometimes spilled… it didn't wash off her hands even if it wasn't set in stone.
"I'll be sure to tell you whatever I can that the NDA doesn't cover, although I did get in some tourist time. The steppes were a nice photography diversion," Max answered as she downed a mouthful of coffee. "I got shots of the Przemsalski's horse. They were on the brink of extinction not so long ago. They look like something you'd see ten thousand years ago. Beautiful creatures they were in a lumpy sort of way…"

Chloe remained silent. She seemed interested, but she also seemed a little sad and more than a little envious. She reached out gently brushed Max's long bangs behind her ear. Chloe leaned in once more and placed her lips on the corner of Max's mouth.

All these years, all this time together, Chloe still knew how to make Max blush. It was rather impressive.

A plate dropped in front of her. On it was pancake as a head, two eggs as eyes, a strawberry nose and a bacon smile. Max allowed a grin to form onto her face as she looked down into the baby blue earnest eyes of Nora standing at her side looking expectantly back to her. She appeared to be waiting for her judgment. She had Chloe's eye through and through. It was the same sort of pride and concern which coloured her wife. Everything that she felt, everything moment of it was expressed without shame or fear. It was that bravery which she always wished she could possess as well.

"Oh, baby girl, this looks so wonderful, thank you so much!" Max praised her warmly as she looked Chloe's way to silently acknowledge her role in the breakfast production. Chloe emitted a smile and a nod back. She would give Nora as much credit as she could.

"Mommy, when you are done could… could you walk to school with me and Mom?" Nora asked her, her chin resting on the kitchen table. She didn't even give Max a moment to consider before she pouted and added. "Are you going to come? Pleeease!"

Across the table, Chloe bit her lip as she reached forward and stole a chunk of Pancake from Max's plate to taste. She grinned a little at the cross look Nora got from the desecration of Max's breakfast plate before Max had even gotten a taste.

"You know, Mommy had a really long flight," Chloe answered for Max before she could answer their child, her eyes were flashing with concern for a wife she thought was jet lagged. "I think we should let her get some sleep… just for today though, we'll be tough on her tomorrow."

Smiling for Nora and shaking her head to Chloe's sweet attempt to nurture her, Max placed her hand on the base of Nora's neck and leaned gave her another peck. She was not exhausted at all. It seemed that while she was in auto pilot she slept through most of the flight home. She felt she could last at least a walk to and back from school. If not, well, she had a giantess who could carry her if need be.

"No, I'll be fine to come along, I slept the whole flight back," she spoke sweetly to Nora with an inflection of reassurance directed to Chloe. "I don't want to miss any more time with you two."

Max paused and allowed a small evil little grin return to her face.

"But first," she declared as she lifted her fork up. "First I need to know if you two learned to cook since I was last home! So far it's not burnt which is probably a marked improvement!"

Max could not help but laugh as she was smacked by both of her girls as she dug into her breakfast. The gentle teasing that went between the three of them was a good distraction for the conversation she was about to have with Chloe. She did not know how to start it, but she did know one thing in
all the years she had living and loving Chloe Price-Caulfield: It was better to dive straight into it than old anything back from the unpredictable nature of Chloe's mood when the topic of Rachel Amber was approached...

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter. These vignettes can be sprinkled into the story. Because time and continuity doesn't mean much between the two separate timelines. Part Two may be a half dozen chapters from now (depends entirely on reader interest in mixing it in so let me know if you want adult family Pricefield that does not interfere with the story origins. They will all be marked under the same chapter titles.

For now, however, we're going to go back. It's time for some pure Amberprice. No Vicky or Max. Back to the basics. I think it's about time for some one on one... Thank you for reading, and I hope to see you soon!
"Hey… hey wait up… holy shit, I need to stop smoking. Why did I agree to this bullshit…?"

Chloe looked ahead of her to see that Rachel was still laser focused on the trail ahead of them. Unlike Chloe she hadn't indulged in the drinking Victoria and she had the night before. Perhaps this was all part of the plan. Wake her up at 6 in the morning and causally announce that they were going to spend the day together. Chloe would have been fine with it if that time together involved them at a greasy spoon not dissimilar to that of the Two Whales and then a day loafing at the beach. It was why she agreed.

Instead, she found herself biking up the East Tiger Mountain on bikes provided by Ryan and Vanessa Caulfield. How Rachel got them, she did not know. Considering Rachel's frosty relationship with the Caulfield's, she suspected it was Max's doing. If it was then Max and she were totally not friends anymore for helping Rachel subject her to this fitness bullshit.

…nah…

As she woke up during the ride out of Seattle, Chloe found herself looking forward to the time that she would get to share with Rachel. As much as she loved her time with Max, she did need some time alone with Rachel. Rachel seemed to be growing more and more restless; and it was not the restlessness which she usually was back in Arcadia Bay.

Rachel seemed… off. Aloof and distant would be an understatement. There were moments when Rachel was a ghost, silent as she passively observed the Seattle life they were both settling into for the rest of the summer; and it all started the first day Chloe and Max spent together solo. It only got worse the more the two hung out. Whatever that was going on, she did not know and was not going to rock the boat by asking Max and Rachel.

She did toy with inching in and asking Victoria if she noticed anything, but then she remembered it was Victoria. Bitch would probably go running to Max and try to undercover snipe the blooming rekindling of her friendship with Max for her own benefit. It was just how that Slytherin operated.

Slytherin… Goddammit he should not have let Max convince her to watch that Potter marathon… hella lame. Totally lame, she was waaaaay too cool to do that.

As she stood up to keep pushing the bike pedals up the steepening embank, Chloe looked ahead and saw Rachel remained unchanged in her determination. So Chloe renewed her efforts pushed herself as well. They had to be nearing the peak of the range by now. This was bullshit; there was a reason why she never went to fucking gym class!

As the two of them made it up the final stretch, Chloe watched as Rachel all but threw herself off her bike with grace as she nearly storm walked herself away towards the vista.

"Hurry up, Price!" Rachel called out to Chloe without looking back at her girlfriend.

Stunned by her girlfriend's behaviour, Chloe nonetheless obliged her and sped up, even if her legs were starting to cramp up. Pushing herself no further than Rachel's bike, Chloe came to a stop and
much more carefully climbed off of the bike. She lacked the grace Rachel had in mobility and had the hang up of not wanting to scuff up the Caulfield's loaner.

At near half a snail's pace, Chloe stepped forward towards Rachel. She had relaxed a little and was sitting cross legged on a park bench carved from a tree. It overlooked the valley below. She did not acknowledge the approaching Chloe until she was sitting next to her. Rachel looked grim faced and just stressed right out.

Hesitating for a moment, Chloe reached out and took Rachel's hand. Rachel did not respond; at least not at first. Rachel squeezed back, her finger gripping against Chloe's.

"I haven't seen you worked up like this in a hella long time, Rachel," Chloe broke the silence between the two of them. "Are you going to tell me what's going on, or am I going to have to keep pretending that everything is fine?"

Rachel emitted a small pout, but at least she permitted herself to relax a little as she leaned in to slump against Chloe. In spite of her growing worry for Rachel, Chloe still smiled. All this time together and even the littlest things washed away her fears. Yet, she could not find any comfort in it; she had to get to the bottom of this. It had been eating away at her for far too long now.

"Yeah, sorry…" Rachel sighed as she tilted her head to look up at Chloe. "I guess I needed to get out of Seattle for a bit. I needed to have you all to myself, Price. What can I say? I'm feeling kind of possessive today…"

There was a small hint of humour inflected into Rachel's strained and tired voice. Feeling a little at ease with hearing that, Chloe reached out and wrapped her arm around Rachel's shoulder. Although she did not melt into her as was usually the case, Rachel did respond by holding Chloe's draped arm tightly against her. Chloe felt Rachel's fingers gripping into flesh tighter than what Chloe usually constituted as possessive.

She seemed to be afraid. Of what, Chloe did not know for sure.

"Well… you got it," Chloe reassured Rachel, hoping it would at least bring some peace of mind. "Was Seattle all that it cracks up to be? It's no Los Angeles, but it's good practice I suppose."

"Yes, and no," Rachel answered as she gazed off to the vista before them. There was a growing frustration colouring her words. "Fuck… I don't know. When I insisted that we head to Seattle, I was well aware that I would be giving up a lot of time with you to Max if the two of you were to make amends. I thought I prepared for it. But I guess it's harder than I thought it be…"

Chloe nodded. She might have been dense at times, but she was not blind to what was right in front of her. Sometimes it just took Rachel saying what was on her mind. In recent weeks, it felt like Rachel did not trust her with what was on her mind. She might say otherwise, but it was obvious she was holding things back. Years of unapologetic honesty promised to one another had an effect on each other. So for her to hold back now…

Chloe bit back the urge to judge or say anything too controversial. As much as she wanted to, this was something not to force out of Rachel involuntarily.

So she did just that: she bit her tongue and for the first time in her brash life, carefully selected her words in a way Rachel did to people she wanted information from. With any luck, Rachel would be too wrapped up in whatever it was that troubled her.

God… the idea of manipulating her own girlfriend… She didn't even know if it would work.
"I appreciate it, Rachel. I really do," Chloe reassured Rachel, gripping her a little tighter. 

Her thoughts drifted off unconsciously to Max. Just the idea of Max being back in her life… it was just so unbelievable that she was back with Max, even weeks on into the reunion. It was light and breezy still between Max and her. They had not touched upon their silence even now. Frankly she was not sure if she was ready for that conversation. 

"It's been so wonderful to have Max back in my life," she confessed to Rachel with a small smile crossing over lips. "I thought I was going to be mad, or hate her… or at the very least resent her. Yet I don't. I'm annoyed she couldn't be bothered to fucking call or anything, but… I think we could work through that."

Chloe looked at Rachel who was looking up at her curiously. There was a foreign looking expression on Rachel's face. Like there was something that she had said to incite her. It was very… similar to something a particularly awful blonde bitch with a bad haircut gave her whenever they had the unfortunate luck of crossing paths with.

And here it was. That awful look being worn by the woman she adored… the woman she loved.

"What about you?" Chloe redirected as she smiled for Rachel, hoping beyond hope that she could break the tension radiating from her. "The two of you seem to be getting pretty chummy. Kind of a strange mismatch, but then again it makes sense: the photographer and my model girlfriend chilling together."

The Victoria-esque expression faded from Rachel's mouth. She nibbled her lip and carefully examined Chloe for a moment. She seemed to be considering just how she wanted to word her opinion of Max. Chloe knew that the two of them got alone, but she also knew Rachel. She knew that Rachel was not going to cut a connection unless Max had been a total asshole.

"From everything you told me about her, I thought she was going to be some awkward stuck up mess… but… she's not," Rachel admitted to her, a wistful tone colouring his words. "Oh, she's hella awkward, no doubt, but I don't mind it at all. I like Max, she's becoming a true friend and I haven't had a lot of them in my life."

Rachel looked away as she shuffled closer against Chloe.

"I don't know. I guess I've been thinking a lot about Mom lately," she admitted after a moment, her eyes falling to her lap.

So that was what this was. She should have suspected it, but with Rachel, she could never confirm that Rose was on her mind until the last possible moment, when everything for Rachel was just too much for her to handle anymore. Even after all these years, it was hard to get her talking about these matters.

Then again, Chloe had been no different after Dad died. She supposed that she got to experience what it was like being Joyce in the midst of her own moody outbursts. It was not pleasant to say the least when Rachel lashed out. It was not so much explosive as it once was: It was smoldering, and questions left Chloe confused and Rachel without the answers she sought.

Next to her, Rachel softened her expression as she seemed to notice that Chloe was confused. It was rare for that to happen when she was thinking about her family. She emitted a thin smile.

"Not how she died, how she lived," Rachel elaborated as she shifted herself to face Chloe properly. "My Dad fell head over heels for Sera. It was true love, then they broke up, and Mom came in and
picked up the pieces, helped heal his broken heart, right? Then what happens? Sera came back into
their lives, and Dad swore up and down that nothing was different, that Sera and he were over even
if he did kiss her…"

Of all the people in her life, the last person she ever suspected to have these sorts of self-esteem
issues was Rachel fucking Amber; especially over Max Caulfield of all people. Why would she
ever think that there was a spark between Max and her that led her to be the James of a Rose and
Sera triangle the formed for that unfortunately brief time before it was destroyed.

As she stared into Rachel's eyes, she knew that perhaps there was some… truth to that.

"But Mom…" Rachel spoke on tenderly. "Mom, she just… she let it slide and then she let Sera into
our lives knowing full well she would be risking my alienation and rejection in favour of my birth
mom; but she didn't let it control her. She was strong and secure and I don't get how that could
happen, or how to be anything like her. If I were ever placed into a position like that, I don't know
what I would do… competing with someone who seemed like she was destined to be the person
someone you love, loved."

Rachel pulled away and stood up. Chloe was about to follow her, but one dead eyed glare from
Rachel stopped her cold. Rachel needed to rant. Whatever this was… all that Chloe could do was
let Rachel defuse herself. If she were to interfere nothing but bad shut would happen. This was not
Chloe's first time stuck in a situation like this, but this felt different than the other times Rachel
needed to defuse. This felt… final and ominous.

"I don't know. Fuck, I don't even know if I'm making sense anymore, I'm so fucking scatter-
brained lately I don't know what I'm doing these days," she muttered as she turned away from
Chloe to look at the vista before her. "I guess she died before Sera really had to step up. Maybe
Sera only did step up because Mom died. We'll never know… Perhaps there was some-"

"Rose would still be your mother no matter what happened, Rachel so stop talking like that," Chloe
cut Rachel off before Rachel could continue her unhealthy musing. "Rose wanted you for a
daughter. She knew she loved you the moment you two met; and Sera… Sera got clean and
dedicated herself to finding you, so she could have a place in your life. There is nothing fake about
Sera's stepping up. Maybe it was a little rushed, but given the circumstances could you blame her?
If Rose lived, nothing would have changed."

More often than not, whenever Rachel and Chloe broached the topics of Rose and Sera and
everything that happened all those years ago, Rachel inevitably and justifiably ended up miserable
about it. This time was something entirely different. She seemed… amused; amused and somewhat
forlorn.

Rachel reached out and took Chloe's hands. She stood there, looking down on Chloe with a strange
acceptance in her eyes.

"I know that, Chloe," Rachel confirmed as she laced her fingers in between Chloe's. "I know that I
am Rose's daughter because I know that you love her, Chloe Price. I know and I still love you in
spite of it."

Deep inside her body, Chloe felt her heart lurch to a near standstill as just what was on Rachel's
mind these past few days finally came to the surface. This was not about Rose and Sera; this was
about something entirely different. A matter which she thought Rachel never would bring up.

Max Caulfield. She thought… she though Max and her…
How could she even think that there was something going on with Max and her? They were just friends. That was it. There were absolutely no romantic feelings for Max, and even if there might have been. Even in that slightest of chances, the fact of the matter was Max was hanging off Victoria Chase like she was the second coming. No, it was utterly impossible.

So why was it so hard to shake the feeling that there might have been a sliver of truth in Rachel's observations?

"Don't say anything, you don't have to defend yourself from observations, it will just look silly," Rachel silenced Chloe before she could even begin to defend herself. "Chloe, I trust you… totally.

But I see it in your eyes, I see it in your smile whenever she enters a room, I can see the jealousy whenever Victoria Chase is near; and it is reciprocated by you whenever Victoria is sniffing around Max. I thought it was just a best friend's connection, but there is more to it."

Chloe's brain had now officially broken down in the face of Rachel's observations. That was the only way which she would be able to describe it. Rachel seemed unmoved in spite of her quiet accusation that Chloe was head over heels for Max Caulfield. Why would Rachel make that sort of connection? Max and her… they were just old friends. Old friends with a long, intimate history together cut short by death, employment opportunities' and a terrible inability to socially function on Max's part.

Then again, she was not much better as Rachel had to delicately point out. Not that Chloe could ever admit a fault on her part to Max or anyone else.

"I'm not mad, Price and you don't need to tell me how you feel until you've had time to really think over what I said," Rachel reassured her, her lips curled slightly as she looked down at her girlfriend. "I just… I guess I suspected it for quite a while now. If there is one thing I have learned since seeing how Rose, Dad and Sera works, it's that love is not as simple a feeling as it ought to be. There are layers and complication…"

Rachel tailed off as she swallowed and silently, she took a seat on Chloe's lap, her arms reaching out to wrap around Chloe's neck. She leaned forward, her chest pushing against Chloe's as she rested her head on her shoulder.

"I think that… Well, in another set of circumstances, Max and you would be together. I wouldn't be upset either, I guess. It… makes sense."

Unsure of how to react to her girlfriend seemingly condoning something she felt incapable of stopping, Chloe could only laugh incredulously at Rachel's melodramatic mourning tone. It was all so ridiculous, really. Did Rachel actually think that she was going to get dropped in favour of someone Chloe was only now getting reacquainted with? Did she think a relationship could be sustained on a childhood of memories?

"Well… what about you?" Chloe decided to humour her, hoping her light tone would be enough for Rachel to see just how weird she was acting. "Where would you be in all of this?"

Silence greeted Chloe at first. She could feel Rachel stiffen up in her arms.

"I don't know where I would be," Rachel murmured into her arm. Her voice was quivering gently. "I imagine somewhere far off. Perhaps somewhere warm. Wherever I may be, I would be happy for your happiness with her. I… would approve of it, whatever may happen…"

Chloe's growing frustration had reached its boiling point. This whole topic was weird and fucking ominous and uncomfortable. It was filled with unspoken accusations that Chloe was going to fuck
Max behind Rachel's back or something. It was bullshit; all of this was fucking bullshit. She didn't fucking cheat. She was a lot of things and most of them were not good qualities, but she would never fuck over someone she loved like that.

Chloe reached back and forced back Rachel's vice grip around her neck. She held Rachel back, so that she stared right into those deep, intense hazel eyes gazing unblinkingly back at her. They were eyes accusing her of feelings which she did not have… she could not have.

Right?

"Whatever…. Whatever it is you think that I feel about Max… you're wrong," Chloe replied, keeping her tone in check and her words deliberate so Rachel did not eschew her words. "Max and I are just friends and we'll always be just that: friends. I care about Max, Rachel. I really do. But I love you, and I think I did the moment we first met. If you're uncomfortable with Max and me, then... you know... fuck it, we'll fuck off out of Seattle together-"

Rachel lazily placed her hand over Chloe's mouth. She leaned forward and pressed her lips against Chloe's forehead. A lot of the strange tension had vanished. Replacing it was this amusement Chloe could not tell if it was real or not.

"I'm not jealous, Chloe Price, I know you'll not act on it. I trust you both utterly. I'm just… clearing the air so that we're all on the same page," Rachel answered her as she pulled back her hand. "Victoria's no fool, either. She knows there's something a little stronger than just a friendship…"

Rachel paused herself and smiled in spite of everything.

"Max, on the other hand, is endearingly innocent and naïve to a fault," Rachel mused aloud. "I think its best we not agitate her with this… for now at least."

As Rachel leaned inwards to kiss Chloe deeply, all these new concepts left Chloe dazed and not sure what all of this was; but after years of loving Rachel Amber, all she could really do was to wait it out and let it unfold. There was nothing much more to do then that. Even if the wait left her with all sorts of new ideas she scarcely wanted to acknowledge.

Max Caulfield and her actually together… yeah… sure… that would happen; and time travel was real as well…

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long. I've been sick for the better part of a month, snowed in and other drama. That and this chapter was spur of the moment. I had other plans in place but felt the Amberprice was lacking. It still kind of is. Not too pleased with this chapter. It should get better in the coming chapters. Next up is a return back to Arcadia Bay with my low key favorite girl (maybe not low key)

I hope you enjoyed, and thanks for the patience.
It was early afternoon, and a relatively slow afternoon at that for Joyce Madsen. Only the regulars were here, which served her fine.

So far for her, the only disruptions she had was Frank and his loud friend… or boss, perhaps. Whatever he was, he made Frank look like sweetheart in comparison. The two of them were talking aggressively and laughing about something only the two of them could make sense of. It had gotten so bad that she was on the verge of having to step up and tell them to respect the other patrons.

Thankfully for her, there was no need to step into the fray. Frank's friend took a call and had left about an hour prior, leaving Frank to revert back to usual introverted silence. It was such a strange thing being one thing for one person when you were something completely different the rest of the time. She did not understand how someone was able to do that. She was taught from a young age to live honestly and forthright. Came from that Texan Baptist life she fled from when she fell in love with that maverick and adorably sweet red head of hers.

Silently Joyce hoped that Frank would figure out who he wanted to be but, she respected it was not her journey. She had no idea what it was like being him.

Through her commiserations for the local weed dealer, she had not noticed that the doors to the Two Whales opened until the bell rung as the door shut. She looked up and found none other than the source of her progeny of her Chloe troubles standing there with that small grin that he passed onto to his child.

The grin was a little off, though. It did not meet his eyes. It seemed as though he was a little distressed or perhaps confused considering he seemed to be looking around the room subtly. His eyes coolly examining Frank Bowsers hunched over his chili.

"Well, well, well, playing hooky from work?" Joyce addressed James Amber, hoping to keep him from busting Frank on something that Frank inevitably was involved in. "I never would have guessed you had it in you."

James broke his focus from Frank and spread his lips a little more to smile for her.

"I took a day off, Mrs. Madsen," James returned as he saddled up on the bar and took a seat in front of her. "It's always a treat to run into you. How are you doing this afternoon?"

Joyce gave Rachel's father the evil eye. It was little wonder where Rachel had learned just how to get someone under the skin and somehow find it both charming and friendly.

"I'm doing well, James, and for the last time its Joyce," she reminded him with a mock sternness she reserved for Rachel. She leant onto the counter and added. "Now… what can I get you? Or are you here to cause me some grief?"

Without blinking, James briefly eyed the menu in front of him.
"Can I just get a golden potato omelette to go, and while we're here, some information..." he answered her with a sly casualness.

Eyeing James, Joyce turned away to file the order to the kitchen and when she returned, she had found him with his back turned to her. Once again he was staring down on Frank Bowers. This time, Frank was well aware of just who was paying him attention. Frank opened his wallet, dropped cash on the table and sauntered out of the diner without a word to either of them.

As soon as Frank had slammed the door behind him and all but ran to his RV, James turned back to face Joyce once more. He had reverted back to his friendly demeanour as though the interaction hadn't happened.

Joyce could not help but be chilled by it. There was something unnatural about it. She reckoned it had to do with the work he had. It took both an actor and a coroner. She had no idea how he was able to hold himself together in the days, weeks and months that that followed Rose's murder. He was able to keep it together and even work professionally with the boy who murdered her and David for his small incidental role in it.

"Your omelette is coming right up, but the information... now that can get a little tricky," she said as she stepped around the counter and took a seat next to him. "Is it about our daughters? Because I haven't heard from them in days; my usual source of information about the Rachel and Chloe odyssey hasn't been in the past few days."

The warm expression he hid behind collapsed and that worry he had been trying to hide was now on full display.

"I actually wanted to talk to you about that," James returned as he leaned onto the counter. "I haven't seen or heard from Sera in a few days. I don't mind it if she has her own things to do, but usually she's really good about breaking off plans and calling back. She's... 'Ghosting' if I'm using that phrase correctly..."

Joyce shrugged. Her pop culture and slangs ended sometime in the mid-nineties.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what's going on, James," Joyce answered him truthfully. "She said she wasn't feeling well and asked for a week off. Sera's has been such a hard worker, she hasn't asked for time off since she came here. So I made sure that she got it."

James' lawyer eyes examined burned into hers. He seemed to understand that she had no reason to lie. He slowly nodded, looking uncomfortable as he did so.

"Good... good... thanks for that," he said absent-mindedly as he turned away. "How did she seem to you? Was she sick or what?"

Joyce examined James carefully. She honestly did not know what to say to him. James and Sera had a history of illness and mistrust. It was like she was prodding into a landmine field or a perhaps the No Man's Land. She had to be careful.

"I don't know for sure; but she was very... shy and a little scatterbrained for a few days before she asked for the time off," she delicately informed him.

Once again James nodded at the answer he received; this time, however, the worry seemed to be growing in him. As his breakfast order came in, Joyce reached out and touched his shoulder, convincing James to look up at her once more.

"Are you two doing all right?" she asked him, concern dripping into her voice. "I know it's not any
of my business, but your situation with her seems… really complex. I guess you were doing good enough to keep it quiet from me for years.

A low chuckle erupted from James.

"I didn't tell Rachel about Sera for 16 years. I could keep it quiet from you for two years in my sleep," he retorted back. He exhaled, and glanced at her. Slowly, he added. "So…how is Mr. Madsen?"

Joyce sighed at the formality, but chose not to say anything. As much as it hurt to admit, she doubted that James would ever forgive David's irresponsible decision to bring a gun into the house not at the very least tell her about it and have a safe place for it. He would never see just how hurt David was in the wake of that terrible misjudgement he made.

As much as she wished he would understand David's personal pain, Joyce knew from experience it was not that easy. None of the remorse that David felt would ever matter to James, just as the remorse to the man who collided into William felt was never accepted by her. When a heart gets torn apart violently just as James and hers had been at the hands of others, the platitudes of the guilty are rarely capable of mending the wound.

"David is doing well, thank you for asking," she said pulled herself off the stool to get James his breakfast. "You know, ever since he got the job, his confidence has been soaring. Chloe will hate it, and will hate having him on campus, but this was a good thing you did. I cannot thank you enough."

James stared at her; there was an expression on his face that she did not register right away. He seemed to be confused, a little annoyed and sort of amused. It was like he should have expected something. It was an expression Joyce saw a hundred times before on the face of Rachel as she navigated the complicated Price mother-daughter relationship, it was the look on her face when Chloe covertly drank half a bottle of champagne and told David's family that Rachel wasn't just a gal pal in the most lurid of details.

"Truth is I was only the influence. If it were up to just me, I wouldn't do it. I can't… forgive him so easily," James admitted, unblinking as he stared at her across the counter. "The only one who was in his corner was Chloe. It was entirely her idea to help get him the position."

Joyce felt her throat go dry as the new information was dumped onto her. Chloe… Chloe had never shown anything but antipathy towards David, and had openly mocked him for years. Hearing that she stepped up and convinced a man who had every reason to despise David to set it aside and help him instead… it seemed so odd of her.

"Can I offer you some advice?" James said as he pulled his wallet out of her jacket pocket. James' hand extended towards her, clutching a twenty. His eyes staring across to hers as he quietly waited on her to give him permission to continue. Joyce exhaled and took the bill from him. As she opened the register, she nodded, keeping her eyes averted. She did not want to look into those eyes. James did not seem bothered by the avoidance; it was probably something he got used to given what he did.

"It's not so much advice as it is a reminder: You are an extremely prideful woman, Joyce. You don't take a lot of shit or praise constructively," he murmured as she heard him stand up from the squeaky stool. "Chloe has more in common with you than you probably think. Don't praise her about the David situation unless you want her screaming at you."
Waving off the attempt to give him, his change James collected his breakfast and made his way to the door. He paused midway before he turned back.

"I'll try to call Rachel tonight," he informed her. "I'll see if we can work out some actual communication between Chloe and you."

Before Joyce could tell James how much that would have meant to her. How much she missed her daughter, James bowed out of the restaurant, leaving Joyce temporarily dazed by the conversation.

...

...

As James Amber approached the home of Sera Gearhardt, he found himself in a situation that starkly reminded him of an era he never wanted to return to. Yet here he was now, attempting to navigate himself through the overwhelming fears building in his mind.

There were only two things that made him step forward and bang loudly on Sera's door. The cool professionalism he learned after decades of seeing the worst men and women could do to one another, and loyalty to Sera. For years she had proven herself to Rachel and him. In the wake of Rose' demise, she stepped up supported him in a way he never expected.

If there was something wrong with Sera… well, he couldn't just up and leave her to whatever it was that she was doing. He had to know, and he had to help her. At the very least she deserved the opportunity to be offered his help.

The door cracked opened and sure enough Sera appeared in the crack of the door way.

She was different than usual. Her head was hung low, and she seemed physically smaller. It was as though all the confidence she had been building these past few years had suddenly washed away. She did not even bother to greet him as she usually did. She instead averted her eyes and walked away, leaving the door open and the invitation into her home unspoken.

The lights were off and the living room – once immaculately put together – was a mess of dirty plates, clothing and blankets. It appeared to him that she was sleeping on the couch. James glanced at Sera's as she pulled off the blanket she was wrapped in and revealed her in pajama pants and a ratty looking vintage *Einstürzende Neubauten* shirt with cut off sleeves. He did not doubt for a second it wasn't their shared closet circa 1992.

He could still recall those carefree days as though they were only yesterday. This was back when he mistook her pixie-like mania to live life to the fullest and without a routine as something to be adored. All of this admiration he had for Sera's inability to adapt to responsibility was long before he knew better, before he saw all the relationship they built together crumble and fall apart when responsibility was thrust into her life all of a sudden.

Things were different now, though as he reminded himself. Although Sera had regained a lot of James' trust in her, it was the little… nostalgic reminders Sera did that brought him back to his twenties and being unable to comprehend why she needed to self-medicate, why he thought she was so selfish, and not really understanding the deep rooted flaws in the wiring of Sera's brain. Most of all it reminded him of his failure to act.

Burning the bridge between Sera and him seemed like the only thing he was able to do. Looking back on it, he did not regret it. It was this act that led him to Rose, and as awful as it was to do to
Sera, never for one moment would he ever feel guilt. Doing so led to a strong, stable love with a woman he adored for the time he had her. Still, while he had no regrets, he did acknowledge it was viciously cruel act. He funded her addiction, and looking back on it now, he did it in part with hope that she would end up like many junkies did. Cruel as it was, the only coping mechanism he had was to turn Sera from mentally ill self-medicating lost person into a selfish monster prepared to chase the high over live a normal life. It was wrong, sure, but it was just something that he had to do it to survive the first years of their separation.

Slowly but surely that story he told himself to survive this psychodrama became a rule of law until Sera showed up in Arcadia Bay a changed woman. It made him unwilling to trust her, going so far as to reach out to the bastards Sera was associated with to get rid of her, to scare her off from ever threatening the stability he had thought he created with Rose and Rachel. The day that they first reunited and he saw her clean and she started threatening him with legal action, a terrible plan started to concoct in his panic, involving forcing her to relapse.

When all was settled, it became such a stupidly evil act he barely could acknowledge it. One would think that after forty plus years of living on this planet, decades into adulthood and years serving as a district attorney, he would not be one to submit to the erratic breakdown when all that was needed was words to solve everything.

With this in mind, James followed the twitchy behaviour of Sera with an uneasy restraint. He had a hypothesis, but he did not want to jump the gun. He didn't want to accuse her of the worst thing she could have done without a little more interaction with her. So far… everything that she was doing reminded her of a time long ago. Long before she regimented her life as ridged as she had when she achieved sobriety. If this was what it was… if Sera slipped… well, he would not be the asshole he was years ago when he was terrified of the mere idea of her. With everything she had done… with how wonderful she was to step up after what had happened to Rose... she earned his good grace back.

"What can I get you, tea or whatever?" Sera asked him, her voice a little higher than her usual careful tone.

James merely nodded and watched as Sera was grateful to give her some space from him. She moved swiftly into the kitchen, leaving James to himself and a free hand to wander the living room, taking in the chaos she left behind. She had an expensive looking laptop on the edge of her coffee table and a cold cup of coffee next to it. The laptop was playing a manic sounding song, the singer breathing rapidly 'Don't leave me… all alone' to an almost Joy Division sounding guitar, bass and drumbeat.

While the post-punk served to heighten his worry, it was not exactly a cry for help he was able to identify. Even when she wasn't like this, he could always count on Sera's unquenchable need to listen to the darkest, most misery inducing music she could get her hands on.

Sera came out of the kitchen with two steaming mugs of tea and an expressionless face. She appeared to be examining him, trying to figure out just why he was here. James took the mug offered to him with an equally expressionless nod of approval. He pushed all the resurging feelings he had for Sera back to the wayside. He had to remain objective to figure this out.

"I haven't seen you in a couple days; you've basically ignored all my attempts at communication. Rachel and I spoke, and she said you hadn't taken her calls in three days," James pointed out to her. "We… I was worried."

Sera finally stared at him, her brow arched as she silently judged him. There were only two women in his life that could make him feel like so vulnerable. Rachel, who he thankfully had the parental
authority over, and Sera, who at the height of her mental and physical health knew how to exert all the psychological pressures that could bend him to her will, until it all came crashing down on her.

Things were different with Rose, however. She and he were true partners. They instinctively fit together, and James found passion in her ability to meld into each other. Neither was the better half, they were equal in all the ways that mattered.

But she was gone now, and here he was, by himself, staring into the expression that allured and haunted him for decades.

"My life does not revolve around you, James," Sera murmured back to him, an edge of nervous energy reverberating from her words. "As for Rachel… she doesn't need me calling her every other hour. I took some time off for myself. I just… I got things that I need to think about."

Sera looked away. In her hands was an untouched pack of cigarettes clutched between her fingers. She appeared dazed and lost in her thoughts once again. As for James, he was left with only more questions.

"Like what?" he found himself asking as his concerns for her were once again spiked.

Next to him, Sera shrugged plainly as she chewed on her bottom lip.

"Like what I'm doing, I guess," Sera said as she threw her pack of cigarettes onto the coffee table. "It won't be long before Rachel is gone off to California, chasing fame or education… or whatever it is she wants. She won't need us soon enough; and I don't know what a sleepy Oregon town has for me once she's gone."

"Just because Rachel and probably Chloe will be heading south next year doesn't mean all the ties are going to get cut," James tersely returned to her. "You need to adapt, otherwise you'll just lose yourself. It's just something we'll have to get used to; and as much as you might want to, you can't just chase after her for the rest of your life. She needs independence, and you more importantly need stability, even if it means staying in this town for a while longer."

Sera did not acknowledge the advice, or his roundabout hit against her current state. He doubted very much any of it registered in her head. Instead she bowed her head, rubbing the sleep from out of her eyes.

"I don't want her to leave," she mumbled to herself childishly. "So I guess it just has me… upset."

"Upset enough to slip?"

The question on the tip of James' tongue finally slipped out before he could catch it. Judging from the confusion pooling from her Sera did not seem to understand at first just what James wanted to know. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable, James stood back up and placed him on the other side of the coffee table. Sera frail looking, the key word being 'looking'.

Frankly he wanted a wide berth between them. Just in case.

The seconds past by in silence, and what James had been inferring before Sera's expression turned cold and livid. He expected her to attack, and spit at the underhanded accusation. As much as he was ready for her, the worst thing happened.

She stayed dead silent. Her grey eyes burned into his, leaving him feeling suddenly overwhelmed and without a plan to exfiltrate from this trap. Like the old days, he was left to drown in the wave of Sera's emotive abilities.
But he was not a boy, pretending to be an adult anymore. He was not going to just let her roll over him.

"I want to know what's really going on, Sera" James cut through her deadening glare. "You're missing work, you're hiding away from me, and you haven't called Chloe or Rachel. I find it peculiar, considering you've never done that before. Rachel has been gone from Arcadia Bay for over a month now, so why is it only now that you're like this?"

James collapsed into silence. He knew better then to push any further. He was now riding a tight line between civility and the two of them going at each other like in the old days when Sera's manic moments clashed with his inability to empathize because of his priorities to a child's safety. He might have believed he was in the right but that didn't mean he was nice about it.

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do," she bit back. "Maybe I know how to keep things to myself. I'm allowed to have a couple days off to myself. I spent years being on my best behaviour, so the least you can do is cut me some slack if I don't want to be around anyone."

None of this inspired in him any sort of faith in her honesty, mostly because she hadn't answered the question. The avoidance of others was a classic Sera tactic used in the worst of their time together. They may not have been together, and Rachel was all grown up, but it didn't mean he wasn't any less angry by her attempt to draw sympathy from him. If anything, her attempt at making him look like a tyrant only served to make him just as enraged.

James stepped over the coffee table and sat down on it. He leaned forward right into Sera's personal space, personal safety be damned.

"You have no right to take the high road on me, Sera. None at all. I've seen all of this before," he reminded her in barely more than a whisper. "I have trusted you for quite some time now; I don't want that to change. So, I need to ask you if you relapsed."

Sera stared at him with that now rare withering glare. It was the sort of look that told James that if they had not had as much history as they had together, she'd have broken the tea mug over his face and force fed him the shards of ceramic.

He could not blame her for feeling that way, but neither would he apologize for it either. The last time he accused her of using was the days preceding his abandonment of her when the truth came out. She was aggressive about being confronted about her substance abuse problems. She'd spit and curse at him like the truth was the absolute last thing that she ever wanted to hear from him. It was the only time she seemed alive after Rachel was conceived.

Sera blinked, her eyes narrowed onto his. Her words came in cold. "I haven't relapsed."

It wasn't good enough for him. He wanted it to be able to take Sera for her word, but all evidence pointed out of her favour.

"I... know that this is not about me, but I'm not mad if you did, and neither would Rachel. I thought I would be, but I'm not," he reassured Sera, well aware of the growing anger bubbling in the woman across from him. "I know how long you have stayed clean and I know that there is always a chance at relapse even now. If there has been a relapse, you need to know that I want to help you get back on track. I can get you professional help and we can work through all of this together."
Sera stared at him incredulously for his probably a little too politician sounding intervention. He expected an angry response, but instead, an absurd little chuckle spilled out from her lips. She leaned forward, her hands cupping both sides of his face.

"James, I love you. Even at my worst, most self-pitying I loved you," she informed him, the anger subsiding as she gazed into his eyes. "Even right now with you treating me like a liar, I still love you… but I'm going to say that here and right now you are an absolute fucking asshole."

That was enough to make James snap. He broke the hypnotic gaze Sera held over him and wrenched the hands off of his face and stood up.

"The last time you were sick and evasive, you abused my trust time and time again," he growled down onto her. "Once upon a time, I put my complete and utter blind faith in you, and you betrayed our family. You wonder why I'm such an asshole? It's because every action has an equal response. I didn't want to be this! I didn't want to turn into this, but you forced my hand. I sacrificed everything I was to protect someone from you! And I would do it again in a goddamn heartbeat!"

James turned away in growing disgust. He stepped back over the coffee table and wandered over to Sera's TV stand. He needed a moment to breathe and collect himself. As for Sera, she needed a moment to digest what he said. All these fucking years, he still doubted she fully understood why he left and the price he had to pay to for freedom from her darkest inclinations.

As he glanced back, he found Sera was sitting there in a strained silence. She was fully attentive now. That anger she had for his accusations was all but drained from her. It was their first real argument since she came to Arcadia Bay and the two of them both felt like shit.

Well… he did anyway.

"Sera… You and I… we have a history of terrible garbage we did to each other," James broke their silence. "But I want it to be that: history. That's what we were doing prior to today, burying that. I want to be open minded here. If you're in trouble, I want to help you, because believe or not, I care about you."

Sera nodded, but remained silent. As much as he wanted her to say something, it was an encouraging sight for him.

"I know that something is going on. I'm an asshole, sure, but I'm a stupid or ignorant asshole," "If it's not you using again, I still want you to trust me to help you, just as I've trusted since… since…"

Her name went unspoken between the two of them; Sera already knew and stayed just as silent as he had. There seemed to be a silent agreement that the two broken human beings that this living room held had no right to speak the name of a genuinely good person.

Sera exhaled, nodding once again. After a moment, she looked up to him and went his gaze.

"I'm pregnant, James."

Two words. All that it took to deflate the air from James' lungs was two words. He could feel his eyes widen as he searched Sera for any sort of deception. Sera sat there, silently staring right back at him. There was no deception, no manipulation of the truth. Instead, she stood up from her seat on the couch.

"Yeah…" Sera broke the silence, her voice amused as James stared back in a daze. "That's about how I feel right now."
Through the haze of the past, Sera could recall that James had reacted to their pregnancy in a fashion not dissimilar to this. Last time, however, by the end of the initial shock came total elation from him. He was beyond excited for the news. He pretty much spent the next eight and change months preparing for Rachel.

Of course she could have had it all wrong. A decade of opioid abuse had fucked up a lot of her memories of those days. A lot of it was a blur, a puzzle with pieces missing. But while a lot of the memories were damaged or lost entirely, she could still recall the radiate joy that he felt at the prospects of fatherhood.

She could also recall a second strong feeling: That was her complete lack of emotion she had for motherhood. There was no joy or hatred, just an empty void in her heart.

While she still did not know what she felt for this, for James at least this time was different. Gone was the youthful enthusiasm, and replacing it was an expression of resignation. All of it was completely tainted by the memory of how everything transpired last time they went through this. As much as Sera wanted to scream at the top of her lungs that she felt safe and secure and never going to go back to that dark place she fought to death to run from, she was not an optimist. She knew full well that what happened next was going to take a toll on her.

With that hard truth set in the forefront of her thoughts for the past week, she knew that she couldn't do it alone. She knew that James had to play a role. Even if it meant having to endure that obtuse attempt at an invention that entirely unneeded. As annoyed as she may have been by his lack of faith, it was nice to see that he cared enough to want to help her if something was wrong with her.

Together, the formerly married couple sat across from one another. Sera had refreshed his tea, but it was untouched. James' hands were covering his face; he looked like he was one bad thought away from having a total existential crisis. She could not blame him for feeling that way. It was not like either of them planned for any of this.

She couldn't even think acknowledge the unspoken third party that was off on her own summer ventures. How was it they were going to sit Rachel down and explain that there was a good chance she was going to end up with a sibling nearly two decades younger than she? Rachel had asked her to take care of James, not sleep with him.

For now, however, she focused on the here and now. She had another two plus weeks before Rachel and Chloe came home. By then she would start to have a sense of what she would tell Rachel. In all likelihood that would involve her sitting Chloe down first and hatching out a plan together.

"How are you doing?" Sera spoke up as sipped her tea. "You look tense. Maybe I can hit you up with a fix to ease the pain."

James looked up, his face weary as he stared at her. He seemed to be searching to see if she was being serious or not.

"That was a joke…at your expense…" she elaborated without a trace of emotion in her voice. "…Because you're an asshole who jumps to conclusions."
"Fuck you…" was James' half-hearted response

Sera did not even have to give a response. It was entirely unnecessary to answer it. Instead of that, the two of them looked at each other and thankfully James finally allowed himself to laugh. It was good to see a little life had returned in him. Perhaps they would be able to get through this or at the very least start the process.

"Jesus Christ… I'm in my forties, James. I finally got my shit together, and then I let myself have a little fun…" Sera spoke up to the now attentive James once again, permitting sarcasm to cross into her voice. "Ever since I had Rachel… when I was using, my menstruation cycle was spotty at best, and that remained so after I got clean. When I missed it this time I just let it slide because that was normal between that and my age…I guess I forgot to factor you in…"

Sera fell silent as James looked uncomfortable at discussing normal biological functions. God, he used to be so much cooler once upon a time. Age brought a certain amount of modesty to him. She supposed that was a good thing, one of them had to be a voice of reason on occasion.

As Sera sipped her tea, she eyed James as he stood up from the other end of the kitchen table. He sat down in the seat next to hers. There was a hesitance, but slowly he reached out and took her free hand. Sera did all that she could to ignore that familiar and damnable jolt of excitement of his affections. Now was not the time to play the blushing quasi-love struck girl. This was her ex-husband and the two of them had a big question they needed to figure out.

"What do you want to do? It is, of course, all up to you," was his carefully worded question. He seemed to be reserving his opinions for the moment. He did not want to flare up a fight over reproductive rights. That was not a fight Sera wanted either.

"That's something I was hoping that we'll decide together," Sera replied as she rested her hands on her lap and looked James in the eye. "As much as I hate to admit it, I'm just too old and too jaded to fall for the whole 'my body, my choice' bullshit. That's a young girl's façade… and I am far too tired to keep that up."

Sera smiled thinly as she reached over and took James' hand. Her spirits rose as soon as she felt James have enough sense to squeeze her fingers back. It was the little things that he did that reminded her of why she fell for him once so very long ago.

"I love you, James; and I respect you for everything you sacrificed for Rachel's happiness and security…" she whispered to him. "I feel like I can't just make an arbitrary decision over something we did together without you there in the decision making process; especially over something big as this, especially with the history that we have."

As she fell into hushed silence, Sera watched James' pondered over what it was that she was proposing. Whatever happened be it abortion, miscarriage to birth and a second shot at parenthood for her, she wanted him involved. She wanted to share all the heartache and the joy with the one person in her life that knew her inside out and still cared for her.

Finally James pulled himself out of his silent deliberation and looked back at her with all of his attention.

"We were about to kill each other about an hour ago, and now you want to go through a pregnancy together… as equals?" he pointed out to her, his voice full of healthy skepticism at the prospects.

Sera immediately nodded. The fact that James questioned her sobriety had hurt her, but it was a good sort of hurt. The small circle of people in her life that knew what she was walked on egg
shells and insulated her from accusations. Accusing an addict of slipping was a difficult thing to do. The face James did it, and did it without using kid gloves to protect her feelings. It felt like someone gave a shit and wasn't just going through the motions.

"If I say yes, then that means that we're in this together, right?" he pressed on, unblinking. "Meaning I get to speak my mind, no matter how much it might pain you to hear it?"

Sera winced at the thought of having DA Dickhead (Chloe's moniker, not hers) on her case for nine months.

"Within reason," she allowed tersely. "You can say whatever you need to say, you just can't expect me to take it like a saint... it's probably better to get it out all soon before the hormones really kick in."

Her attempt at some sort of levity fell apart the moment she saw that James was not smiling. He was not in the mood to be teased. Considering the circumstances, she reckoned he had good reason for that.

"The last time we did this, you were not in a good place. I'm not just talking about motherhood, but the pregnancy as well," he recalled, growing regret tinging his words. "I tried to help what I could, but we both were still just kids handling a first pregnancy and times weren't so… enlightened…"

Although Sera did not acknowledge his words at first, she agreed. The environment of the mid 90's seemed so... medieval looking back. She could recall trying to talk about her feelings to her parents, and both of them just... stared at her like she was a madwoman.

She learned quickly not to rely on family from just one meeting and sought other ways to solve her pain. She would not blame them for her falling in love with a needle – that was her decision alone - but their indifference was adding fuel to a bonfire.

"No, our parents weren't exactly helpful with advice," Sera said thoughtfully as she pulled herself away from the dark thoughts. "What did your Dad say again? "James, you got no reason to be going to those faggy Lamaze classes? You're a man, son! The doctors are getting paid for a reason."

Sera smiled as she watched James bury his face into one of his hands. James father wasn't exactly a proponent for the modern age, even for the mid-nineties. He certainly had his opinions on Sera. None of them were nice; but all of them were painfully correct.

"Yeah... not my father's greatest moment, was it?" James replied, sounding exhausted as he pulled back to look at her. Allowing a flickering smile, he added. "I tried my best, you know? But I was over my head. We both were."

That was something Sera wholeheartedly agreed with. James had the best of intentions, but best intentions didn't always equate to saving a life. Not when she was actively working against his desperate attempt to help her. They were both too young and James was ill prepared for the levels she was prepared to delve into.

"You helped as much as you could to lift my spirits," she agreed, squeezing his hand. "But... James... James, I was ill. I was ill in a way that all of your efforts and good intentions couldn't fix. It was not your fault."

James remained completely still; as he seemed to come to terms with her attempt to clear him of whatever guilt he might have felt. He was a tough man, hardened by a career and fifteen years of
isolating himself from these feelings.

"I know that now," he spoke up as he looked up to her. "I spent… years thinking that it was my fault, or that I didn't do enough. Even now, know what I know, I still would be out of my element. I'd still be making nice gestures but…"

"It wouldn't be enough," Sera finished for him.

Sera and James held their eyes on each other for a while longer. It was still daze for her at least to be having this sort of conversation. James looked as though he was holding back, or deliberating something. Whatever it was, Sera permitted him a small encouraging smile. Thankfully he seemed to take the hint that they could not be partners in this if he didn't speak his mind.

"Our situation is better this time," he pointed out to her, his voice lighter, as though he was trying to find some silver lining. "We know better how mental health affects pregnancy – both in theory and our own experiences together. So, if you are willing, or need one, rather, you could go and see a professional from time to time to check up and confide."

Sera inspected James as his words washed over her. It was a surprisingly painful thing to hear. That someone thought you needed a professional. However, she would likely benefit from that sort of personal care. It was that pride induced self-destructive thinking that she needed to work out.

"I… don't think you are wrong to suggest that, a professional would be a correct course," she admitted to him slowly. "I would prefer that to be done on my own. I care about you, James, and you know more about me than almost anyone else; but this has to be at my pace, okay?"

James nodded, if he wanted to protest he decided against it for the time being.

"… And perhaps we could see someone together," she added shyly, moving her chair a little closer. "I think we both have to have a stronger relationship together. I'm not saying we have to get married or anything, just… we have to be less explosive with each other. We don't need to have to take cues from our daughter about how not kill each other..."

She watched as James emitted a small chuckle at the thought of the two of them having to take cues from Rachel and Chloe about successful relationships between polar opposites. Sera could not help herself; she wrapped her arms around James and pressed her lips against his.

"There are a lot of things I want to talk to you about," she said into his ear. "And for starters we're quitting smoking together."

Sera could not help but take a little solace in the miserable groan James emitted.

...

song: The Soft Moon - Dying Love

Chapter End Notes

Probably going to stick to these two for a couple of chapters. There's a lot I have been wanting to explore for quite some time.
Eighteen hours into finding out he was on his way to another round of fatherhood, James was wide awake with Sera curled up next to him. It seemed as though it was her first restful sleep in a while. She had relieved herself of the burden she held onto by herself and placed it onto him instead.

Perhaps an outsider would think he was being unfair, or that he was diminishing Sera somehow. The thing was Sera was never a mother in her life. At least she had not been for the majority of their daughter's life. She instead chose the illusion of freedom to responsibility. She had her reasons, of course. She had so far been taking the right steps in acknowledging her short comings.

Then again, who was he to judge? He had his own sins when it came to fatherhood. He knew full well that his work load led to a lot of the resentment Rachel had felt in the months and even years before she reunited with Sera. Sometimes his career took away from his family life, sometimes he just had to throw himself into his wok because of how much Rachel was resembling a mother she did not know exist.

But that was not what was keeping him up right now. His relationship with Rachel was on the mend now after years of Rachel's thawing following the revelation of his lies. No, what really troubled him was what this pregnancy was going to do to everything the already fractured family had been building these past few years.

The three of them (four, if he were to include Chloe who was already assuming the role of daughter in law) had been establishing a relation to each other built on mutual respect and honesty. How was it going to look when Rachel found out that the relationship between her biological parents had flared up into something different? It was a relationship that might have been an old hat for Sera and him, but utterly alien to Rachel.

As much as he wanted to have faith in Rachel being old enough to be logical about all of this, he unfortunately could not count on it. She was going to remain a minefield was the foreseeable future. He thought about engaging Chloe and this new friend Rachel had made –Max – if he recalled correctly; and while shifting the burden of Rachel's volatility onto others in her own age range was tempting, at the end of the day Sera and he had to take total responsibility over this… surprise chance at extending her family.

He allowed his thoughts about explaining sexual activity to his daughter go unanswered. Next to James, he could feel Sera shift in bed. It was not a movement made by someone who was asleep. For as long as he knew her, Sera always a loud and expressive sleeper, moving and hogging blankets. This morning, however, she appeared to be paralyzed and holding her breath.

It seemed like she too had a lot of thoughts racing through her mind. They were likely thoughts that, like him, she was probably unwilling to speak him out loud. As much natural chemistry as they had together, as much history as they had, there was still grievous mistrust between the two of them. As much as they tried and would continue to try, the feelings that they had were not going to go away because they were having another baby.

So they would keep working at it. That inclination of secrecy would have to be something that the
two of them would have to work on together. These baby steps would have to be taken together, no matter how much they hurt. After all, they had potentially another 18 years of dealing with each other. Mistrust at this level would be unsustainable, and if it were to continue, it would not be long before Rachel and Chloe stole their new sibling away from James and Sera if they remained locked in a cold war.

The thought alone of Chloe Price and Rachel raising a kid at their most punkish stage meant James wasn't going to be getting anymore sleep.

…

As miserable as his attempt at sleeping was, it seemed as though Sera's mood had considerably lightened.

Sera seemed to be no longer living in fear now that the truth was out, and probably more important than that, was that he was ready to support her. He doubted very much that the smile and the breakfast she had gotten him would have happened if he told her he wanted no part in it.

As the two of them walked at a brisk pace down his neighbourhood's sidewalk, James and Sera did their best to avoid the attention of his neighbours. Neither of them was particularly interested in idle chatter with them any more than they were the rumours that were undoubtedly flying since the start of summer. The neighbours weren't foolish; they more than likely knew that there was something going on in the Amber home while Rachel was away.

It was not that he was ashamed of what was simmering between the former married couple, it was just that he was very conscious of them and the fact that his political life was bound to be a major hurdle. As far as everyone knew, Rose was his only wife. If things were ever serious, and with a baby on the way, it looked as though it was going to be, he was going to have to answer it, along with every dirty secret that could be dug up about Sera's history.

There was no changing that, it was just the nature of the political game he volunteered for before his world shifted into one that he had not planned for. As much enjoyment as he might have had for his work, it was something James was growing less and less fond of. Here he was, in a quasi-relationship Sera, in a district that every other person had had face to face dealings with him, or more importantly, Rose. How long exactly could he keep what outsiders thought was a causal thing from them?

He glanced over to Sera and found she was preoccupied as well. Her fingers were fidgeting. Her urge to smoke was probably already flaring up. She understandably had a lot on her plate; and until she was in comfortable and safe place. He was not about to shake up Sera's psyche with the thoughts of potential external problems he feared when she was probably already feeling that uncomfortable state return to her.

Sera looked up suddenly and caught James staring at her. Sera's mouth twitched into a slight smile, and so did James in return. Lightly, she stepped closer to him, bumping her side against his.

"So," Sera murmured, breaking their silence. "I take it that you couldn't sleep as well?"

James glanced at her for a moment and pondered just what he wanted to say to her. Honesty was the best policy, but that didn't mean he couldn't stall for some time before he invariably heightened the tension between them.
"You know, you could have acknowledged you were awake," he pointed out. "It might have been nice to have someone to talk to."

"You seemed like you needed some time to yourself. Believe me, I get that," she replied. "Besides, I wouldn't want to interrupt your exit strategy plotting…"

Sera emitted a small laugh as she earned herself a light slap on her shoulder from him. Although they were keeping it light, it did not stop James from thinking that was her actual concern. It was difficult to get a read on her, especially this soon.

Still lightly chuckling, Sera soon trailed off and looked away from her attempt to snark at him. James followed her eyes and found that she was staring down one of the neighbours out in her garden. Meryl Adelson, she was a woman in her sixties if he recalled right. She always had a kind – if simpering -thing to say to him, but nothing anything interesting, unless it involved Chloe Price bringing her lower middle class lifestyle to her end of the town.

Sera waved at her and James watched as Adelson's face grew sour at the acknowledgement she was given. From the looks of it, like Chloe, Sera gave off a poor vibe and she wasn't going to have any of it in her nice, quiet neighbourhood.

I'm glad that you came with me. You get to see all the lovely neighbours you have," Sera remarked to him, her tone tinted with mild amusement. "You know, I have been making this walk for years now and still your neighbours hate me. I imagine you're going to have a lot to answer for soon enough."

Giving Sera a look, James shrugged as he waved to the older woman and smiled his best to her.

"I don't care what they have to think," James muttered as turned his eyes forward. "Impressing them was always Rose's forte. Me, I got better things to do than talk about the weather with Mrs. Adelson."

A shadow of a smile was fleeting across Sera's lips. Yet for that briefest of moments, all of his worries had vanished and James found himself entranced in her. It was that intoxicating quality to her that drew him back time and time again. It was a reminder when all seemed possible and neither of them was weak, world beaten people.

Although he could relish in this small reminder, it also revitalized that guilt which had been brewing in him since yesterday. He was so quick to exhort Sera into admitting her sins, but he was nowhere near as willing to admit his own to her. These past years, she flagellated herself without knowing that he wasn't much higher up the chain.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking about our new… policy," he informed Sera, his voice struggling to maintain a steady pitch. "We have a lot of baggage built up over the years, and you're not the only one who made mistakes."

Sera, it seemed, did not notice that there was a shift in his mood. She merely laughed lightly at him.

"The great James Amber admits to mistakes?" she mused sarcastically. "Well this is a turn of events I hadn't expected. What is it? You dip into the girl's secret 'how to get through Blackwell' stash?"

"I was going to kill you, Sera," he said as briskly as he could. "When you threatened me with a custody battle, I decided I was going to use everything I possessed to kill you."

There it was. It was out there between the two of them, and he watched in horror as Sera came to a
sudden stop. She did not turn to him. She just stood there, her eyes forward and wide.

"Not physically, I was going to kill your spirit," he allowed himself to elaborate, knowing full well what he was opening himself up to. "I gathered my contacts with Damen Merrick. I was going to exchange evidence or money, or something in return for him abducting you. I guess my plan was to get you hooked again."

Sera didn't speak. All that she did was turn to him. Sera didn't have to argue, or defend herself. She could have, she was well within her right to go at him. Instead she just stood there staring at him not at all surprised by what he had said. He wanted her to scream and embarrass him in front of the rest of the neighborhood, because at least then he'd not feel so alone.

It was that goddamn gaze of her, poisoning his resolve. He stood there locked in place, his heart beating hard in his chest. She was just as still as he as she held those cold eyes on him.

"You interrupted my family's life, you spent years taking my money and putting it in your veins, and you thought you could just waltz back into it because you had a change of heart? No, I was going to destroy everything you put back together. I-"

"What stopped you?"

There was a light headed moment wash over him as Sera's words came out as barely more than a whisper. James could distinctly hear the betrayal ooze from those three words. He did not know how he could face her, but he did. She was inexpressive, but still he found her sharp eyes judging him.

"You're not a man who shows mercy or forgiveness after you left with Rachel," Sera coolly spoke. "What stopped you?"

James shook his head. It was a question that kept him up at night because the only answer he had was too absurd for him to fully believe.

"I don't really know for sure," he answered her as he gazed back at Sera's unreadable expression which had been betrayed by her inflection. "Something Chloe said that, the words were the gibberish of a teenager who could barely articulate what day it was. I was not the words that affected me; it was the way that she said them. The utter devotion she had to Rachel. I knew… I knew that Chloe would figure out a way to find you. So, I abandoned the plan. I couldn't let a couple of irresponsible teens wander like idiots into the deep end."

He leerily watched Sera as she absorbed his explanation. She did not change her expression. He had expected confessing that he flirted with doing the unthinkable to her would bring about the rage he knew all too well about. Yet that did not happen. Instead, Sera just stared at him. Like "That's it?" he said before catching himself. "You're not mad?"

Sure enough that question caught Sera's attention right away. She turned back and faced James properly. Although on the surface she continued to appear like it hadn't fazed her, he could see that Sera was far from fine with what he had confessed to her.

"You think that I should be shocked by this? I'm slow, not stupid," she unexpectedly snapped at him.

The reaction was enough to startle him; it even appeared to have startled her as well from her wide eyes. Her voice was an explosion from a seemingly calm demeanour. James had always prided himself on trying to keep himself from saying stupid things, but what he had said was indeed a
level beyond that.

Sera took a deep breath and collected herself. Her eyes never left his as she seemed to challenge him to speak again. She did not have to worry; James was put into place in an instant.

"I am upset, I'm just not going to waste emotion on it," she answered him, her voice quivering as she once again turned her head away. "Not on something I pieced together years ago."

He watched in, frozen, as Sera stepped forward to close the gap between them. It took all of his willpower not to back away from her.

"It's funny that you always seem to forget that I know you, James Amber," she reminded him, her voice stone cold as she pierced his eyes with her own unflinching glare. "I figured you had something cooking. You don't spend a decade and a half hiding from me, only to just be nice when I show up unannounced. You don't just jeopardize your political career for some junkie. You take steps to stop the problem before it causes troubles, and I was going to do that."

Sera exhaled and nibbled on her bottom lip. She blinked and looked away for a moment as she seemed to deliberate on what she wanted to say next.

"Besides..." she slowly murmured. "...I was prepared to murder you as well..."

As James' did a double take at her admission, Sera crossed her arms and looked back to him.

"Perhaps not so cruelly as you had planned for me, but I was going to murder you in the court of public opinion," she muttered to him. "I was going to paint myself as a desperate mother with an untreated mental illness, who collapsed into drugs and instead of helping me, you divorced me, and threw money at me to keep me out Rachel's life knowing full well I couldn't just say no to keeping my addiction financed. That I crawled out of the spiral you funded and fought back."

After a moment of silence, Sera unexpectedly reached out and placed her hand over his.

"I don't think I would win the case, but the point wasn't to win. It was just to ruin you and everything you stood for," she continued. "If you refused me, I needed to ruin the life you built without me. A life I thought I deserved with no strings attached. I thought that I deserved Rachel more than Rose – the interloper – ever did. I spent months just... seething. I didn't understand until you called me up and told me Rachel knew about me."

Letting him stew in her confession, Sera turned away and continued walking down her route, leaving James behind for a moment. Like Sera with his own set of sins, he too had known that Sera was preparing to sue for custody. He had not expected just how malicious she had planned to be. He could not blame her now, but back then it would have been a bloodied drawn out battle and their daughter would hate them both.

Collecting himself, James caught up to Sera who glanced at him with a grim look.

"Look at us," he mused, hoping to break the tension between them. "I thought age brought maturity, not vindictiveness..."

Thankfully for him, Sera emitted a thin smile at his words, but it vanished as soon as it appeared.

"I know we've talked about this, like, thirty times since I told you I was pregnant," She said, her voice sounding a little exhausted by it. "But if something happens, I give you full permission to do what you did last time."
She turned to face him and took both of his hands.

"But James, I'm not going to fuck this up." She assured him, her tone firm and unshakable as she made him this promise.

James did not have to answer her. He trusted in Sera. Or at least he was willing to try. There wasn't any high ground to take over her. Not when he was willing to do awful things to her. Together they would just have to take this one day at a time until that mistrust they both created finally dissipated.

"We're terrible for each other, so why do I like being like this? Is there something wrong with me?" James asked her, his question earning the first real laugh they had together in the past day.

Feeling Sera reach out and take his arm. He watched her shrug her shoulders. That coy smile of hers returning once again; it always shined of that rare display of confidence she was willing to admit to.

"We're glutton's for punishment, I suppose," Sera hypnotized as they walked together. "How we got together in the first place is still beyond my understanding. I mean, you were not as cool as you think you were when we met."

"I was cool, Sera," he protested immediately. All it did was earn a derisive snort from Sera for his lame attempt at a defense.

"You thought Birkenstock's and socks were cool. Trust me, you were a dork," Sera stated, leaving no room for James to debate his fashion choices. "James Amber: the poser trying to impress the hot chick. Still… to your credit it worked…"

He could not help but smirk. No hot girl could resist his socks and Birkenstocks.

"So," James said. "What kept you up last night?"

All of the good cheer which Sera had possessed only moments ago vanished before his eyes. Sera's silence was telling as she let go of James once again. If Sera thought she was going to get away with it. That he could confess to her, but she wasn't held to the same standard, then she had another thing coming.

"Don't try and weasel out on me," James sighed, attempting to inject a little levity back into him. "I thought that we agreed we're in this together. No more holding back secrets, no omissions. If there is something on your mind, you get to say it. So say it, before I annoy you into telling me."

"So…"she started, sounding like she was about to be admonished by him. "I… might have stumbled into the wide wonderful world of social media, and I tracked down Dawn."

The blood in James' veins froze as Sera uttered one of the ghosts of her past openly for the first time. He turned and found Sera fidgeting and looking like she was in a sudden state of heightened stress at the mere mention of someone James himself had seen in over a decade. Even the mere mention of the name brought back a flood of memories James put in as much effort erasing as he tried to do to Sera.

It was, after all, not every day that Sera talked about her sister…

"She's in Arizona now," Sera pressed on before James could voice his thoughts to her. "Aaron is in Maine, and both of with families of their own. It seems that every August they head back to California to visit Mom and Dad. They're in Redding now."
Dawn, Aaron, Peter and Martha; the Gearhardt family was now in the forefront of his thoughts. It had been so long ago now. He cared for them all, yet after Sera's implosion, they ended up the first innocents affected by his detachment to Sera. It wasn't a typical in-law relationship where the two parties tolerated each other; he arguably had a stronger relationship with them all than his own family. Peter and Martha knew full well what Sera was and did all they could to help.

At the end it just wasn't enough, and he had to hurt them to save Rachel and him from Sera. He did not want that for them, but want and need rarely went hand in hand when it came to that era.

"And you know all of this how?" James asked her, his voice forced into an alien feeling calm.

Sera's nervousness only increased tenfold at his simple question.

"I might have been aware of all of this since you and I brokered peace," she delicately explained, like she feared he would be upset. "I... I guess I sort of figured one step at a time. I want my family, but getting Rachel back was my priority. Then after what to... to Rose, I suddenly got into this relationship deeper than I thought I would. I have no regrets, of course, but..."

"But it was faster than you expected."

Sera fell silent, and nodded to answer his observation. James was well aware of the speed which Sera was integrated into the family dynamic after Rose died. He knew that it must have been hard on her. She had barely a month of knowing her child and suddenly she was to just... summon up that much motherly instinct for a grieving child.

"I just... I hurt them almost as much as I did Rachel and you," she pressed on as soon as she found her words once again. "I haven't seen Aaron and Dawn since before Rachel was born, and my parents it was... God... 1997, I think. My concept of time wasn't very clear back then."

James merely nodded as he absorbed Sera's repressed guilt finally spilling out after years of holding back. He sometimes did not know how she could do that. Just... be brave enough to admit when something she did bothered her. Perhaps it was due to the life she once lived. An introverted addict who lived with nothing but her guilt and her disease that kept all those feelings at bay. Now here she was; clean and no longer afraid as she once had been.

"What about you?" Sera spoke up to him. "...Have you heard from them? Or... did you... you know?"

Yeah, he knew what she was implying.

"Sera, when I cut ties to you, I had to cut ties with them as well," he explained to the woman attentively watching him. "I saw Martha and Peter one time after. I brought Rose along with me so she could understand what I left and the woman I had to leave behind. She got her first insight into just what was driving me to keep you away."

The ghost of Rose enforced a silence between Sera and him.

"Look, what exactly are you asking out of me, Sera?" James blurted out through the crippling silence. "Are you asking for my blessing to go? Do you think I need to give you permission? I'm not your jailer. If it's something you need to do, then by all means do it."

Sera bowed her head and took a quicker pace from his.

"I want to go to Redding, James," she finally verbalized. Her eyes averted like she was afraid he'd
give her his answer with just one telling look. "I want to make contact with my family. I would very much like it if you came along with me. If I go alone, I don't think they'll believe what I have to say."

Sera's silence returned as she struggled to speak these pent up desires to James. His silence was likely unhelpful, but it was all that he could give her. All of this was so sudden for him. Ripping open a scarred wound was always something tried to avoid.

"I hurt my parents terribly the last time, and that alone will make them not believe me. My sister will definitely not believe me," Sera continued, full of nervous energy. If you came with me, I… just think a unified showing would really drive the message that I'm not that kind of person anymore."

All that James could do was come to a stop. Sera did as well and turned back to him. Sera wanted him to be her advocate. He was to step forward, casually reunite with a family he had loved and was been forced to cut off, and somehow convince said family that probably thought Sera died years ago that not only was she not dead, she was better now and wanted to make amends.

Sure, he may have had to make amends for his plot against her, but this wasn't what he wanted. Frankly, he'd rather yank out his own teeth than do this.

Already exhausted by the notion of this California trip, James examined Sera for a moment before finally, he curtly nodded. He watched her, hiding his amusement as Sera seemed to collapse her defenses the moment he nodded and felt her hands grasp his sides for some sort of support.

"That's it?" was her dazed words as James stroked her arm. "I was thinking I'd have to argue more…"

"If you weren't pregnant, I'd have put up more protest," James admitted as he pulled his arm away from her shoulder. "Right now I'm thinking that maybe it's a good thing. We could get to excise the past… and besides…over fifteen years is far too long not to speak with your family."

Sera's relief was intoxicating. James tried not to drown himself in it.

Chapter End Notes

That took longer than I anticipated. Maybe more Sera and James, maybe a switch back. We'll see.
It had been quite some time since she took this much of a risk. Not since her first meeting with Rachel, has she ever been quite this nervous… god, what an absolutely terrible time to quit smoking.

Sera knew the moment she told him what her most private desire was, a countdown would begin to when she would find herself in this position. James was always proactive about these matters. Ripping the band aid off the wound as the old saying went. She both admired and feared the sort of drive James possessed, and subsequently passed onto Rachel. It made time with the two of them exhausting from just how inexhaustible they were.

But that sort of passion was something she could appreciate when it was the little things. Reuniting with a family she had not seen in a decade and a half was something altogether different. She had expected that James would need a at least a few days to arrange things, but that was an expectation not based in this decade. Through the miracle of technology (or that James was the boss of his department) the two of them were on the road, Cali bound 36 hours later.

It was strange to be back in the state after so long. Contrary to what James might have thought, she did not spend her exile in California. She moved from state to state, running from what haunted her. She had only been back to California once in order to humiliate herself in front of her family at the peak of her addiction. It was all a genuine haze, but she remembered insulting her mom in some way. She called her old and fat and a whole slew of things for a reaction.

Looking back on it, the only conclusion Sera came to was that she did it all just to feel something. The drugs weren't working anymore and she was left with that terrible void and she could no longer ignore it. Perhaps she wanted violence inflicted upon her. Perhaps she wanted to hear them tell the truth about how they felt for her – which that to them, she was a disappointment and they were ashamed that they had wasted so much time on her. If she could convince them to hurt her, then maybe the drugs would give back that comfortable haze that they should have been.

Yet, the words she sought for them to say never came. Instead something far more terrible happened. Mother and Father walked away without saying a word to her. There was no expression of hatred, or love, or regret. They left her completely devoid of the pain that would fuel her addiction. She was left hooked to something that didn't bring any sort of fulfillment. Worse still was that it left her completely alone. She could at least pretend her parents still loved her, but in that moment she had nothing left.

This cataclysmic silence….It… fueled a lot of the worst moments of her life. She kept hitting what she thought was rock bottom, only to find there were still levels to keep falling to. Now, however, maybe… maybe it did her good in the long run. It was the first real eye opening on what she had become. She was alone with an addiction that did not love her back; and she threw away everyone she loved for it.

There was a festering hated in her for doing this – this near constant reminiscing about the past. Just when she felt as if she was finally moving past it, something invariably came up that brought it back to the foreground of her obsessions. This time, it was family and a pregnancy doing it. It always felt to her that she was picking at a scab on a wound on the verge of healing. She confided this annoyance to James, of course, and James being James told her that it was an investment.
Endure a little heartache so that you get it into the past and leave it there. It was, after all, what she had done with him and Rachel, so why not her family?

It made… sense on paper, but James wasn't the one who screwed up his life like she had. Still, confirming that James plotted destroying her brought a grim satisfaction to her. For too long now, James had been untouchable. He wasn't the one who abandoned their child after all. She always looked on him like he was perched over her. Not so much in an oppressive way… just. He was a better person than her. It came to her as a relief that James was as human as she was. Ready to make extreme mistakes to protect others from threats he thought were real.

She did not like to see James embarrassed like that. It was cute to see him being shy back in their youth, but that was for whole other reasons. Still, she did take a little pleasure in seeing him knocked off his throne.

She did not know what to expect, but she hadn't expected the two floor family house they were parked across the street from. The neighbourhood looked like an affluent place for raising families. Mom and Dad were sixty… sixty-three if she remembered correctly. They should have been trading in a big place for something more manageable. If Dawn and Aaron weren't living out of state, she might have thought it was a reasonable purchase.

"Do you want to wait in here?" James broke their hour's long silence. "I could go ahead, warm up them so that you don't just… you know… startle them."

It felt like a stay of execution. Sera did her utmost to look cool, collected and causal as she nodded. James more than likely could see through her façade. It was more for her than for him. She reached down and unbuckled her seat-belt, and found James was staring inquisitively at her. The resolve she thought she had collapsed nearly immediately under that damn intoxicating gaze he possessed.

"I saw a park a few blocks back," she spoke up. "I think I'm going to go have a smoke…"

James squinted at her somehow more judgmentally; his expression was enough to wash all of her desires to smoke from her thoughts. He turned away from her and stared ahead. Although his focus on her was removed; she felt his hand rest on top of hers. She could not fight the impulse to squeeze the tips of his fingers. If he noticed her reaction, he did not show it. Although he was better at concealing fears, James was clearly as nervous as she was.

These past few days, she had been so wrapped up in what she wanted to say, that she hadn't fully comprehended what this reunion meant to James. They were family once, and he had to sever all ties with them. They all could have resented him for what he felt he needed to do to protect Rachel from her. Yet, in spite of this he was here willing to help her with this. It meant more than she could ever express to him.

"Sera, it's going to be fine one way or the other," he tried to reassure her, and ease some of that jitteriness bubbling in her. "If they accept you after you make amends, then that will be wonderful. If not –and they are well within their right not to forgive you - well, we can close this chapter of your life and just try to move on. We'll have our own little unit: you, me, Rachel…"

James tried off and looked slightly sheepish upon bringing up their daughter who was still in the dark to any of this. It seemed these days that Rachel's reactions to things were predictable in that she was unpredictable in her reactions. She may have loved Sera, but Rachel adored Rose and this… thing between her father and Sera was not something she would likely be comfortable with. Not given the history she knew about.

"Well… maybe Rachel," he amended as he pulled his hand away from hers and opened the driver
side door. "I mean, if she doesn't disown us and flee with Chloe and the baby."

As James turned away to unbuckle and step out of the car, Sera could not help but nervously laugh at the mental image he had painted for her. The very idea of Rachel and Chloe, both of them in the height of their teenage, young adult rebellion raising her child as their own… god what a shit show that would be.

Sera was brought back to reality by James who turned back to face her. His expression seemed a little off. It was very reflective… thoughtful.

"Look, If it means anything, you should know that I'm proud of you for doing this," he spoke to her, his voice sounding genuine. "It takes a lot of guts to look your sins in the eye. If it all goes wrong, then I'm proud of you for even trying. Not many can say the same."

There was no time for a response, James closed the door, and with the confidence Sera envied, he had already begun his march across the street. To her, his pride in her meant a lot. But that pride wasn't enough for her to keep her in this car for any longer.

...

...

James shook his head and bit back the urge to laugh as he watched Sera pull classic Sera tactics and flee to somewhere quieter.

He knew that she would stand and fight to prove herself to them, but that did not mean she would do it on a drop of the hat. She seemed to prefer picking her own battlefield, and a public park was a much better place to engage from in her mind. Neither side had an advantage at a public place.

So with that, James loitered across the street for a couple extra minutes to give Sera time to escape in case her parents decided to talk to him outside. AS soon as she disappeared from sight, he took an unsteady breath and tuned back, silently contemplating what it was he was going to say to a family he walked out on nearly two decades ago. If Sera thought she was the only one who was nervous, then she was dead wrong.

Truth was he was just as nervous as Sera. He was just not afforded the luxury of showing it. He had no idea what he was going to say, or how he was going to broach the subject of Sera. How could anyone stand there and sell Sera – a poison still in their eyes – to people who were unintended causalities to an illness Sera suffered through alone. In their eyes, he spent almost twenty years in isolation from them, only to suddenly drop back into their lives and proclaim Sera was a changed, or at the very least recovering, woman?

It was going to take a thousand things going to right to even begin fixing this this ruptured family, and yet it would only take one misstep from each of the very human, and very hurt parties for it to all come crashing down. As much as he wanted Sera to feel closure for this, the likelihood that this was going to end in tears was astronomical. As for him, he just didn't want to see Sera hurt.

Yet, as this desire to protect Sera seeped into his thoughts, he still knocked on the front door and took a step back.

It did not take long for the door to be opened; he expected to see Peter, or Martha. He had not thought that he would be standing there, with a lack of words ready with Dawn Gearhardt standing right there in front of him.
Dawn, of course, shared quite a bit of similarity to her elder sister. She was a little taller and more filled out than Sera, whose body seemed to be perpetually thin. Dawn looked a lot more of a mom, James reckoned. She was also significantly more tanned than Sera. Life in Arizona seemed to take its toll on her. Not in a bad way, she just didn't look like the Cali girl he remembered.

He watched as she slowly came to recognize him. He could not blame the delay it took. She must have been eighteen when they last met each other. The realization…well…dawned on her just of who it was standing in front of her after years of absence. She seemed flooded by the wave of memories the two of them shared together during his brief time in the Gearhardt family.

Of course, she was not the only one struck by gravity of this reunion. It brought back that flood of memories of the old days. Driving Sera's siblings around whenever they were back at the Gearhardt's, family dinners and holidays; and all it did was serve to tear his thoughts back to all those terrible unanswerable what-if's, which only served to indict a woman he was trying to forgive. Years now, James had been making an effort to express how he really felt. It was part of his penance for his failure to Rose.

So James did what James did best. He put the mask back on, and slowly offered Dawn a smile that he perfected for a decade and a half, yet physically hurt him to perform right at this moment.

"Hello, Dawn," he softly greeted her.

That was all that it took for the levee to break. James felt arms which flew around him, and before he could step back Dawn had pulled James into a crushing hug, polar opposite to her sister. Sighing, James returned it and unconsciously let his hand behind her head, which she immediately buried her head against the nape of his neck.

"Look at you," James commented idly. "You grew up and got old."

Dawn pulled back, a flash of anger resonating in her eyes before she softened and chuckled.

"I could say the same for you," she exclaimed as she pulled back to inspect him, a wide genuine smile granted to him. "God, look at you, you're dressed like a…"

Dawn trailed off. James knew exactly what she was on the verge of saying. The fact that she refused to say 'Dad' told him all he needed to know about how she felt about the last time they met. It was a furious mess with him having to explain to a pleading and hysterical Martha that he had to cut ties with them. The silent defeat in Aaron and Peter, and the fury of Dawn cursing and screaming at him for a betrayal she thought he was committing. She was right to be mad. She had lost three family members on that day.

"So..." she started once again. Her tone much more measured as reality seemed to set back in for her. "What are you doing here?"

Dawn was not a naïve girl the last time he knew her, so he suspected it would be far less so now that she was grown. Instead of inquiring further for the moment, she quietly reached forward and pulled James into the house and shut the door behind them. As he looked at her while she gestured to a row of shoes, James obliged and bent over to untie his laces.

"I was hoping to speak with your parents," he semi-lied to his former sister as she removed his trainers. "I thought that it was time to check in with them. I wanted to see if you all were doing well... and give updates."

The smile Dawn had, slightly vanished. She appeared much more curious now.
"It's a good thing you came by when you did," she murmured as closed the door behind them. "Mom and Dad are out of the house right now; they took the children out to see a movie. Mom and Dad... they're getting up there now, and I'd rather them not get a sudden shock."

James nodded curtly. "Right…" he murmured apologetically. "This was a rash decision on my part to not call ahead-"

He did not get to finish his apology. Dawn dragged him back into another hug. "James Amber, you don't need to worry so much," she reassured him. "I'm just so happy to see you doing so well."

As they moved a little further into the house, James found himself staring at a wall of pictures of the family, taken over the years. None of them featured Sera. He supposed that was to be expected. Pete and Martha were… pretty stern people. At least Martha was. Martha's father was a combat veteran, who marched across Western Germany in the dying months. So it came to no one's surprise when Martha joined Radio Free Europe in '68 to promote freedom to the repressed eastern European peoples trapped under the thumb of Soviet control.

What was not expected was her falling for a beatnik West German boy named Erich Peter Gearhardt, or Peter as he preferred. He himself was a son of a combat veteran who marched… well… everywhere in Europe and ended the war fighting men like Martha's father. Papa Gearhardt apparently loved to gloat that while the war was lost, the war for Martha was won by his son, and god did it ever lead to family rows. Decades later, even on the day he married Sera he saw it happen; although by that time they were both a little old for fist fighting.

While Sera and Martha were polar opposites, Peter and Sera were attached at the hip. She seemed to idealize his youth and sought to live it as much as she could. It probably played a role in her downfall, but he would keep that theory to himself. Sera loved her dad so much, that she went out of her way to learn German, something Dawn, Aaron and even Martha seemed indifferent to learn. The two of them would have long conversations in his native language and it drove the rest of the American Gearhardt's up the wall. James thought it was sort of nice they did that together, even if German was like nails on a chalkboard to him.

However, this was so long ago. Everyone was different now, gone was Peter's pride and joy, erased from their life and he had seemingly replaced her with a near doppelganger of Sera. Standing there with an arm around Peter was an early teenage girl. She was one of Dawn's children by the look of it. It appeared that they had fully transitioned into grandparents now. They had found a new stability after the mess Sera and he created for them.

Yet here he was, near twenty years later, ready to shake up the foundation they had built. It made him almost want to flee. "Dawn, who is it?" a deep voice called out as Dawn took his jacket with a smile.

Entering the foyer to join Dawn and James was a familiar man and a visibly pregnant woman who he did not know. It was Aaron, gone was the awkward teenaged boy he had to leave behind. He was all grown up and confident looking. He was a little taller than James now, and just like his sister, Aaron immediately charged forward and gave James a crushing hug.

"James Amber!" he exclaimed as he pulled back and gave James a playful shove like they were both kids again. "Holy shit… you got old."
"We all got old," James corrected him, earning a laugh from Aaron.

"Someone care enough to tell me what's going on here?" the second woman inquired. Inquired was sort of a polite term, it sounded more like a demand, but she did not seem to have any malice.

James glanced from Dawn, who looked a little annoyed by her, to Aaron who was clearly head over heel for her. From the accent, English was not her first language. She sounded Mediterranean… Greek, Albanian, Italian, something like that. She had long dark curled locks, pulled back into a ponytail, accentuating her bright wide eyes and a head or two shorter than Aaron.

"James Amber, this is my wife, Isadora," Aaron introduced the woman to James. "James was… close to the family back when Dawn and I were kids."

Although Aaron was downplaying what James actually was to the Gearhardt's, everyone in the room could look into her frighteningly large emerald eye that Isadora was not dumb enough to take Aaron's words at face value, but she chose not to push it just yet. Instead, she stepped forward, ignoring James' outstretched hand and instead kissing him on each side of his face.

"I shall pretend to believe that for the moment," Isadora dramatically breathed into James' ear before pulling back and taking a step next to her husband. She gave him a small shove and pretended she hadn't done it.

Amused to see Aaron under Isadora's thumb, he turned back to Dawn, who appeared much less amused by it.

"If I did my Facebook homework correct, then Tristan is somewhere around here?" he asked her causally.

The air between the group of adults suddenly intensified and Sera wasn't even the topic point of discussion. Aaron and Isadora glanced at each other, and both of them took a step back from James and Dawn. Dawn looked either on the verge of tears, or ready to explode on him for an insult he did not intend to commit.

Dawn's fury gave him a moment to remember Sera when she had swung to the other side of the pendulum. It wasn't all crippling, secretly medicated with opioids. Sometimes Sera collapsed into total fury, breaking anything in her path and screaming for hours on end. Sometimes the cops would be called, and the assumption would be that he did something, but the cops always washed their hands of it. They'd give him a warning and a sympathetic pat and leave him to her growing madness.

"Tristen and I are separated," Dawn spoke as briskly as she could clear the air before it got too strained. "It's… sort of a new thing. We haven't made it official, but it's over."

James blinked at the news. He looked to Aaron, who nodded, his mouth pursed shut. He was clearly as angry about it as Dawn was, so something bad must have happened. James, having spent a long time now dealing with Sera, stepped forward and wrapped an arm around Dawn, who immediately hugged him.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," he sympathized with her. "May I ask how bad it was?"

"Bad enough that I'm changing my name back to Gearhardt," was her dark toned response.

Okay, so it was that bad.

"I'm not licenced in Arizona; I am in California, but practicing family law is for masochists," he
informed Dawn. "If you need to lawyer up, I got a few cold-hearted people in California and Arizona that I know who could help you out."

Dawn emitted a small chuckle into his arm and pulled herself back from her embrace. She wiped her eyes and nodded as she looked up at him.

"I'll hold you to that," she muttered to him as she crossed her arms over her chest. "And how is Rose doing? Has she… has she sanctioned this sojourn to our family?"

Like Dawn had done with the divorce talk, he took a page out of her book.

"She passed away," was James' brisk, impersonal response, as though he was discussing it in a courtroom. He watched as Aaron and Dawn's mouths fell open at his words.

"I… Oh my god, James… I'm so sorry… how… oh… hell… I'm sorry…" Aaron was the first to speak. As stern as she seemed to be, it was all just a show and James watched as Isadora wrapped her arm around her husband in support.

"A dumb kid with a gun, too much alcohol in his blood and something to prove to someone who didn't feel the same," James informed him trying to usher through it quickly so that he did not have to dwell on it and leave it to fester in his thoughts. "…It… was a few years ago now… hard to believe that… even now."

Dawn pulled her hand away from her mouth to carefully read James for a moment.

"I didn't like Rose when you brought her," she confessed to her former brother-in-law. "It felt like a betrayal when you brought her. You were walking away with a new woman and she had stolen something so absolutely precious from us; But… but it makes sense now and…"

She trailed off, her voice losing all her strength for the briefest of moments. She took a breath and recollected herself.

"Did she love her?" she was her final inquiry.

Four words, four words from a woman whom he hadn't seen in two decades was enough to nearly crack through the barrier he built to protect himself from her ghost. He did not want to weep at the question. He had put so much time and effort into dealing with his grief that he was not about to let it overtake him once again, especially not in front of the Gearhardt children.

All that James could physically do was nod to the question.

Thankfully for him, Dawn accepted the answer. She stepped forward to him, there was a question on the tip of her tongue which he knew was going to spill out.

"Do you…" Dawn struggled, looking to her grim faced brother for a moment. "Do you have photos of… of Rachel?"

James pulled out his phone and handed it over to Dawn. On it was a collection of photos, some taken in recent years, some taken when Rachel was still just a child. Turned out Sera was surprisingly tech-savvy and she converted some of the older photos he had around the house into digital copies. He didn't like them as much as the originals. That was something Sera teased him for, but he liked what he liked.

It was not long before Aaron pulled away from his wife and joined his dumbstruck elder sister in scrolling through the gallery, leaving Isadora visibly confused until Aaron came to his senses. He
looked up to her and took the phone from Dawn, who was visibly annoyed by it. He brought it to Isadora. On the screen appeared to be a photo from this year. Before Rachel decided she needed to tattoo herself.

"Isadora, this is Rachel Amber, your eldest niece," he introduced Rachel to the wide eyed woman. "James was a member of this family once. He was married to Sera back in the early 90's. After… after Sera got sick-"

"-Feeding heroin into her veins at every opportunity," Dawn viciously cut across her brother. There was no respect, no sympathy, worse there was no love at the mere mention of her elder sister.

It told James all he needed to know how this reunion was going to be. A blood - and possibly bloodied – nightmare.

"Sick," Aaron repeated his defense of his elder sister, earning a roll of his sister's eyes. "James had to leave her. He took their daughter, Rachel, and left."

So far, the only upside he could see was Aaron. He did not seem to hold the same hatred Dawn did. There was still a lot of grief in his explanation to his wife, but it was far more reasonable than the sister, who felt betrayed by what had happened so long ago.

James glanced from Dawn to the living room. Dawn nodded and ushered everyone to follow her. James slumped onto the loveseat and sighed as he folded his hands onto his lap.

"It was not an easy thing to do, walking away like I did," James spoke as Dawn, Aaron and Isadora sat down on the couch opposite to him. "Dawn, Aaron, you both were old enough to know how much I loved you both, how much I loved your parents."

Aaron nodded; Dawn remained stoic as she seemed to be working out why he was actually here.

"I had to leave, so that Rachel had a chance at a normal life," he continued before Dawn could work through it on her own. "She didn't need to have two mothers - one of them abusing drugs and mentally ill - competing for her. I've seen what chaotic families collapse into since I got into criminal law, and I'm unapologetic for it, no matter how much it hurt the two of you."

He paused for a moment and sympathized with Sera's cravings for cigarettes. The tension was boiling over now. This was well beyond the point of no return now.

"The reason that I am here, is not because of Rachel," he informed the silent brother, and the near furious sister. "It's that I want to talk to you all about Sera."

"Is she dead? Is she finally dead, James?" Dawn was the first one to speak; not that her brother had time to contemplate something to say. It came right away, her words breathless like she was anticipating good news. "

Her near glee at the thought of Sera's death startled him. It suddenly hit him just how much agony Sera had caused to the family. Aaron was not taken aback. It seemed like that he was not with Dawn on that opinion of Sera, but he was not going to condemn it either.

"No… no… she's clean," James said to the two siblings, unable to hide being startled by Dawn. "She's been clean and sober now, going on three years now."

Dawn rolled her eyes and puled herself out of her seat.

"Trust me, I was just as cynical about her as you are now, Dawn," he informed Dawn rubbed her
temple. "I trusted her with Rachel, and she abused it in the past," "She got clean, waited a year and then she found us. Rachel knows about Sera. Rose and I set ground rules; rules which she followed to the letter. I expected her to fail, for a while I wanted her to fail. But she didn't. She's held onto a job, respected the rules."

"Why are you here, exactly?" Dawn growled at him. Her teeth clenched as she glared into James' eyes.

"Dawn, you're not fooling me, you know what I'm doing here," he answered her, already growing exhausted by this.

Dawn laughed humourlessly at him and shook her head. To her, even broaching this topic was madness. Like him with Rose, she too seemed to be trying to bury the past so that it stopped hurting. He did not blame her for doing this; but this wasn't a death. This was a chance at renewal. All it took was a little trust.

Trust, however, seemed not something Dawn was ready to give out. Not with her divorce fresh on her mind, and now an old wound being wrenched open by his meddling. For Sera this was going to be an uphill battle. He hoped that she was ready for the struggle.

"This wasn't my idea, I didn't know she wanted to try this until a few days ago," he informed the room as Dawn turned away. "She'd been sitting on this for years after Rose died. She placed Rachel's wellbeing before her own needs. If she was willing to do that for me, then I am willing to do that for her."

Aaron's mouth contorted into the slightest of smiles as he looked to Isadora for a moment. He seemed to dare to hope that the nightmare was over, and that he was going to get his sister back after all these years. Dawn did not acknowledge this; she instead walked to the window and looked out onto the street.

"Is she outside, waiting in your car?" she snapped, rounding back to face him. James shook his head.

Quietly and quickly, Dawn approached him and took a seat next to him. There was nothing but repressed rage as she examined James.

"She is a poison to this family. She brought nothing but ruin to us. She drove Rachel and you away," she reminded James, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Do you know how many nights my Mom cried for Sera? It took years – years- before Mom and Dad could smile again and have one day where Sera wasn't haunting them… and now that she's clean, she thinks she can just walk back into our lives? Worst still use you and your daughter to slither herself back into our lives?"

James shook his head.

"Sera's not dumb, nor is she naïve. She knows that there was harm she inflicted on you all," he defended Sera from Dawn's bitter fury. "All that she wants to stand before you, show her contrition, listen to everything you want to say, shout, scream… whatever you feel to her. If, at the end of it, you still hate her and want nothing more to do with her, then you are well within your rights, but at least give her the opportunity to say her piece, and give yourself the freedom to say what you need to say."

Isadora leaned out of her seat and pressed her hand on Dawn's knee to get her attention. She immediately got it.
"Dawn, what happened between Sera and your family is... not something I can understand," Isadora addressed her sister-in-law. "But I have sisters, an elder sister too and she's your sister no matter what. You must respect your elder sister enough to listen to her story. If she placed that much effort into changing her life, then she has the right."

Dawn pulled Isadora's hand from her knee and pushed it aside.

"You're right, you don't understand," Dawn spoke with as much patience as she could produce. "I love you, Isadora. I do. But I am asking you to stay out of this."

"She's in this family, she gets to voice an opinion," Aaron snapped at his sister before turning to James.

"I want to hear what Sera has to say, James," he spoke to his former brother. "Dawn thinks she has become the head of this family, but she isn't. If Sera wants to see us, I think we should let her. She's not expecting us to forgive her, right? She might be genuinely mentally ill, but that's not carte blanche to do the shit she did."

"Sera only wants some time to let you all vent," James reassured him. "Forgiveness is entirely at your own discretion."

Aaron fell silent for a good long moment before he sighed and nodded. While James was happy to have him on board, all this did was drive Dawn deeper into rage. It must have felt like a betrayal to her. The two siblings were probably closer thanks to Sera's problems. Neither wanted the other to fall down the same hole she had. Now, after all these years, one wanted to hear her out and the other was not so forgiving... It must have burned Dawn.

She emitted a disbelieving laugh and shook her head.

"Fuck Sera, fuck her temporary recovery, and fuck you James for trying to screw our lives back up," She said, staring at the floor. "I thought you were smart, not this dangerously naïve!"

Done with this conversation, Dawn stood up and walked away, leaving Aaron, Isadora and him alone together. It was clear she wasn't a fan of being this outnumbered by dissenters. He could not blame her for feeling that. He watched as Aaron whisper something into Isadora's ear and kiss her cheek. He did not need to hear what he had to say. Not as he too stood up and followed after his sister.

Isadora and James were alone now in an awkward position of being two strangers left alone together. They met each other's eyes and James smiled apologetically to the woman who was still digesting all of this new information.

"I am sorry that I put you in this situation with Aaron... where he didn't tell you about this," James apologized to the woman. "When I left, I had no intentions on ever coming back. We would have been effectively dead to this family; but... situations change, people change and here we are..."

A thin smile crossed her lips. If she was annoyed by it, she wasn't going to reveal it so easily.

"I knew about Sera, of course, but Aaron must have taken your secrecy to heart, and I respect he felt that way," "Tell me, are you staying?"

James nodded to her. With the confirmation that he had no intentions of walking away from this just yet, she nodded. Isadora attempted to get to her feet, but it was clear she was struggling with it. James stood up and stepped forward and helped her up onto her feet. He reckoned he was going to being doing this quite a bit in the coming months...
"Thank you, Mr. Amber," she murmured. "Tell me, would you like some tea? I brewed some tsai tou voumou… It's a… a mountain tea. It should calm the nerves."

"It's James," he corrected her formality. "And yes, I would, thank you."

Nodding, Isadora patted James' shoulder and beckoned for him to follow her, presumably to the kitchen.

"It's good to have you here, James," Isadora idly spoke to him, amusement growing in her voice now that the ice was broken. "After the break-up, I thought I was going to be the only outsider to this family of mad men… and we have time before the children come home, they are hitting the park first."

James did all he could to not explode with laughter. Poor Sera ran away from the snake nest just to stumble into another. He wished her all the best.

…

Sitting on a park bench, a lit cigarette between her lips, Sera could not help but feel guilty for it.

By the time that she made it to the park, Sera ended up degrading herself by breaking down and buying a cigarette off a group of teenagers hanging out at the part. Little bastards charged her five bucks, and like an idiot she didn't even try to haggle.

She knew she was trying to quit, but that wasn't going to be an easy road. She could rationalize it. She could tell herself that the cigarette smoke wasn't going to affect the pregnancy this early along, but that sort of thought process led to paths she did not want to ever travel on again. So, with that in mind, she would smoke the cigarette and promise to start again tomorrow with better resolve. She didn't quit drugs overnight either; it was a miserable psychodrama of trial and error.

She knew that she should not have been smoking, but she knew she had time before she had to quit for good. With what was about to happened, she would figure anyone who mattered in her life would forgive her for needing some sort of stress release.

There was no going back now; James was in the minefield that was Dawn Calvert nee Gearhardt. She felt guilty for leaving him out there, but honestly she did not want to have a confrontation with Dawn, who never liked being surprised for as long as she could remember. She would, at the very least, listen to what James had to say.

So in silence she smoked and pondered just what she was going to say to everyone when James called to summon her to the house, or brought them all here as she preferred. She reckoned all that she could do was listen. There was never going to be an explanation which she could use to explain why she had done what did. Rachel was far easier to explain everything to. She was too young to understand what it was that she had done, but her family. She had poisoned the well long before and long after James had left. They were not going to make this easy.

Sera glanced around her surroundings. There seemed to be more children in the playgrounds. Two girls and a boy, one of the girls was significantly older than the others. She was pushing the girl and boy on the swings with a wide grin on her face. She seemed to be genuinely having a good time with the children. It was very strange behaviour for a teenager.

For a moment, just a flash, the eldest girl locked eyes with the staring Sera. She seemed visibly
confused, but smiled and nodded for her. Sera looked away and took another drag and tried to wash away that creeping feeling that something familiar about her. It sent a shiver up her spine and that urge to run came bubbling back up. The girl was a splitting image of Dawn. It was like looking into the past.

She pushed the fear aside, she was just nervous and it was leeching out into her life right now. She had to calm down, read Rachel's latest texts for the umpteenth time and pretend that everything was fine. Everything was going to be fine. She looked again and noticed that the girl was no longer alone with the children. Standing there with them was two ghosts of Sera's past. A man and a woman, both of them looking right back her, dead in her eyes.

Of the two, the woman was the more proactive, she always was. It both bugged and frightened the shit out of her that someone like her could exist. She was cold looking, like she refused to allow any optimism to cross her. With near robotic precision, she approached Sera.

Sera, feeling a sudden flash of adolescence rushed to drop and stamp on the cigarette, as though she was going to get into trouble for it. Silently, she pulled herself out of her seat, her hands clinched at her sides. It felt like she was standing at attention in front of a woman she hadn't seen in nearly fifteen years.

"Sera?" the woman called out to her.

Her hair was longer than she had remembered; much more grey was mixed into the blonde. The lines on her face were a little deeper now. She was also significantly thinner than she was in 1996… or 1997… 1998 perhaps? Whenever it was, she looked very healthy for a woman of her age. She did not know what she expected, but it was not this.

"Hello Mother," Sera greeted her mom, there was more formality in her voice than she had intended.

Mother stepped forward, like she was approaching a live bomb. It was not that long ago that Sera was just that. She seemed to be inspecting her daughter's face, and then without any warning, she snapped her hand out with unexpected speed for a woman of her age. She grabbed Sera's hands and turned her arms over.

Mother and daughter looked down and stared at the many track marks left behind during Sera's act of slow self-destruction. All of them were fading, but none of them would ever leave her flesh. They were scars which Sera was learning to live with. Each one, a reminder of an era she never wanted to go back to.

For a moment, and just for a moment, there was a strange… relief that creeped onto mother's face. It did not last for long. Hope was not something Martha Gearhardt was willing to fall for so quickly.

"I had to check," she whispered, still looking at the marks, clearly unable to look her child in the eyes. "We have children here and I wasn't about to expose them to… that. How long have you been clean?"

"For years now," she informed her, a look of near amazement crossing over the older woman's eyes.

Unable to keep looking at her marks, Sera gently pulled her away from her mother and took a step back. She wanted to hug her, to show her the love she needed to know that she still felt, but she did not. Doing such things was too soon. Slow and steady, like she had with Rachel… especially when
"I had to admit I had a problem, which was easy compared to learning to love myself again..." Sera elaborated for her fully attentive Mother. "Honestly, I still... struggle with that. But I have outlets now. I have people who love me, I think... no... I know they do now. I have... reasons to be better than I was..."

Clearing her throat, Sera reached into her pocket and produced her phone for her mother. She tapped the screen to an image of Rachel taken only a few days before Rachel left for her trip. She had ensnared her daughter in a hug and Rachel was faux struggling against the pressure. With a slight, warm smile thinking about her, Sera handed the phone to her Mom and let her take a look for herself.

Sera watched in silence, watching as mom judged her grandchild. There was a ghost of a smile at the image.

"Rachel Dawn Amber... God, she's so beautiful, Sera," Mom breathed as she looked up from her eldest grandchild to her eldest daughter and added. "Sera, I'm... happy for you."

She said the words, but it was questionable if she had meant them. There was still so much pain which echoed through her mother, and that was a reality which Sera had to accept. There was going to be so much bitterness she would have to wade through. There was a very real possibility that James' warning was right, that she would have to wash her hands of her. If she was going to be a mother again, then Sera couldn't do it with toxic relationships, even if she was the reason for it.

She would try to save this relationship, she would put her efforts into it, but she could not drain herself to make her Mom love her after a decade and a half of resentment. She had a future to think about now.

"You know, this wasn't how I thought it would happen," she started to confess to her mother, who was now a little more attentive. "I kind of...well..."

Sera trailed off as she looked up and found her father standing there, several feet behind her Mom. He gazed at her, transfixed by her. Sera reckoned it was night and day between the last time they saw each other and now. Sera glanced at her Mom for a moment, and watched as she inclined her head. Sera stepped by her and closed the gap between father and daughter.

He was silent, even into his sixties Papa was too cool to make the first move. Or perhaps it was some sort of Teutonic parental punishment meant to drive the child into a frenzy of guilty confessions. So, knowing he was not going to crack. Sera took the first step.

"Es... umm..." Sera started, and stopped herself just to rack her brain on correct pronunciation. "Es ist so schön, dich wiedrzusehen, Papa..."

Papa stood there still in silence, but he was not turn. If anything, he looked like he wanted to cry.

"You have not been keeping up with speaking the language," he lightly chastised her, his moderate accent still as heavy as the last time they met. "You sound like that blasted internet translation - google, or whatever - has."

Sera could not help but chuckle at the language critic. The only thing she could do was nod.

"A lot of old things... they don't come so easily to me anymore, Papa," Sera informed her father. "... and I haven't really had a reason to keep speaking the language for a very long time..."
Without speaking another word, Papa wrapped his arms around her and openly wept.

Sera did not know if she had ever heard such a thing from him before. Maybe once when he found out he was going to be a grandfather. So Sera stood there, frozen in his arms, rubbing the back of her father as he cried on her shoulder. She looked back to her mother, who unmoved, her eyes glancing back to the swings. Sera glanced in the same direction as well and found the girl was staring at her like she just knew what Sera was to her grandparents.

Sera turned her attention back to her father. It was a taste of what her mother, Dawn was going to react. It wasn't going to be a pretty reunion; she anticipated that Father was going to be the highlight of the reunion.

"I shall teach you to speak again," Papa announced to her confidently, a watery smile granted just to her as he cusped her cheek. "I… missed you so much, my little girl. So much…"

Sera nodded and pulled back from her father and gave him a moment to recollect himself. Honestly, she would like that. She wanted to salvage whatever good she could from her mess of a past. If he was willing to help her, she was ready to accept it.

"I… sent an envoy to the house so that I could avoid Dawn and Aaron until they were ready to see me," she informed them, deciding not to drop the James bomb on them just yet. "There is so much I want to tell you... all of you. I… made so many mistakes…"

Papa shook his head. He looked so upset that she would place so much blame on herself. It was sweet of him to try that, but she was going to bear the weight of her actions regardless of his attempts to shield her.

"The worst was made by us," her father spoke, wiping his face and breathing in deep just to steady himself. "We didn't pay attention to what was wrong; we did not help you when you needed it. By the time we understood what was broken in your head, you were gone, and we never thought you would… you would come back to us… not alive."

Sera bit her lip at the dark, but not unreasonable feeling her parents had and smiled. Deciding that she did not want to venture further down this path for now, she gestured off to the children.

"So… these are your grandchildren?" she said as lightly as she could. "I have nieces and a nephew now… You know, Dawn really had her young…"

Her words sparked a look between her parents. Like they were deciding what they wanted to say to their absent daughter Dad looked amused, and Mom looked like she wanted nothing to do with this, but she ignored all her instincts to shut down. Instead she turned to the children.

"Cassandra," Mother called out to the eldest girl. "Cassandra, could you come over?"

The eldest girl, Cassandra glanced at her siblings and reluctantly she bit the bullet and approached the adults. She looked like she wanted to be anywhere but here in this moment as she stood between mother and father. Papa pressed a hand on Cassandra's shoulder, whom looked up and smiled faintly to him. The smile vanished as soon as she turned her attention directly to Sera.

"Michael… Mike and Lauren are your nephew and niece, Sera," Mother stated to her, she gestured to the teen and added. "This is Cassandra Gearhardt, your sister."

The information took a moment to register. Sera stood there, staring numbly at the family. She squinted to her father, as though needing confirmation. Papa nodded. She looked to her mother, and suddenly all the pieces clicked into place… she wasn't fat when she showed up at their home for
the first time, she was…

What in the absolute hell…

Her throat was dry. She turned her attention right back to Cassandra, who clearly knew about Sera. She still remained locked in silence as she inspected a woman she was probably taught out of date information about. Then, out of nowhere, a thought hit her, and it was so absurd that she just had to laugh right in front of her parents, in front of her new baby sister… who her own daughter was older then by easily half a decade…

She had always thought herself her father's daughter, but she was more like her mother than she ever anticipated…

Chapter End Notes

Uh Oh.

Thanks as always for all the comments and your patience above all.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!